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ROLF BOLDREWOOD

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BY

ROLF BOLDREWOOD

AUTHOR OF 'ROBBERY UNDER ARMS,' 'THE SQUATTER'S DREAM,'
'THE MINER'S RIGHT,' ETC.

*IN THREE VOLUMES*

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## CHAPTER XIX

Not only on that next day, but for several days following, did Estelle wend her way to Number Six soon after breakfast was concluded at Mrs. Delf's very punctual establishment. During this repast, and for some minutes afterwards, it generally happened that she found herself conversing with Mr. Stirling. That gentleman took so deep an interest in each and every question connected with Lance Trevanion, that, as she more than once owned to herself, his own brother—had he one in this strange land—could not have done more or appeared more anxiously considerate. He caused Mr. Hastings to be sent for, and that gentleman appeared dressed in

a habit of the period, and by no means resembling the picturesque miner of fiction. He also exhibited a keen sympathetic interest in all Estelle's plans and prospects. He recounted his first introduction to Lance, and amused her by picturing himself as a hunted fugitive pursued by the minions of the law, finally captured and manacled. 'Nothing that mortal man could do,' he repeated with emphasis, 'was too much for him and his friends to do for Lance, a gentleman at all points—brave, generous—only too confiding; the victim of an unjust sentence—if ever a man was in this world.'

'You can't tell how grateful I am to you and Mr. Stirling for the way you have spoken of him,' she answered. 'If only the poor squire could have heard you. Thank God! that he was spared the knowledge of his son's disgrace; danger, or indeed death, he feared might have been his portion; but imprisonment—a felon's doom and sentence—that!—oh, that! he would not have survived a week.'

'Stirling and I are his friends, Miss Chaloner,' he answered calmly. 'There is no more to be said. We are neither of us given to forming friendships lightly, or changing them afterwards—we may not be able to do all we wish—but what is in our power shall not be spared. Will you permit me at this stage to ask whether you propose to go in search of him, and how you are going to set about it?'

'There seems no doubt that when poor Lance left Melbourne—escaped from the hulks—he travelled into the interior. There is no one—no one that I know or can think of—who could give me further information. But I shall go to Melbourne. It is one stage on my journey; it may be that I may discover the next one while there.'

'I can give you positively no advice as to your movements, for the moment,' returned Hastings thoughtfully. 'I can only counsel you to remain here a few days longer, when, between Stirling and myself, some plan of action may be arrived at.'

'I am not restless,' she made answer, 'though I do not wish to lose time. Anxiety and trouble in the end may be saved by not being too hasty. I will therefore stay a few days longer than I at first intended. But on Monday next I must return to Ballarat, *en route* for Melbourne.'

'And after that?' queried Hastings, almost unconsciously. For he could not help pitying from his heart this high-souled maiden, so utterly alien in every thought and feeling to the people by whom she must of necessity be surrounded. He saw her quitting the comparative security of even this humble retreat for a doubtful, even dangerous, succession of journeys in quest of what—of whom? An outlaw and a felon! Guilty by his country's laws, and self-convicted now by his breach of prison regulations. Doubtless he had received hard measure and unjust sentence, but had he been true to himself and the traditions of his race, he needed never to have placed himself in peril of the law. 'However,' he con-

tinued in mental converse, 'she will never be persuaded—woman like—that he has descended from her ideal. She must "dree her weird," as our Scottish friends say.'

So for the next few days Estelle amused herself by studying the ordinary miner's life, partly in company with Mr. Stirling, who generally found her quietly seated in Mrs. Polwarth's cottage in the afternoon after bank hours, and partly from information derived from that worthy dame, who was far from averse to diffusing her information.

'I don't see but what it's as good a country as the one we've left, Miss,' said the shrewd matron; 'anyhow it's better for the likes of Jack and me. There's a deal of rough ways and drinking, it's true, but no one's bound to take part in it if they don't like. Jack, he's steady and sober,—I'm thankful to the Lord for it,—and we're putting by more cash every washing-up than we ever heard talk of in the Duchy. When Tottie's a year or two older we'll send her to school in Melbourne. There's

good schools there, I'm told. There's no reason why she shouldn't have the learning as we never had. We'll make a lady of her, please God.'

'I see no objection, Mrs. Polwarth, to her having the best education possible,' replied Estelle thoughtfully. 'At home we are apt to disapprove of children being educated above their station, as it is called. But in a new country every one has a chance to rise in life, if they prove worthy of it, and there is no reason why my pretty little Tottie shouldn't be as much a lady, in mind and manners, as any one else.'

'Do you really think so, Miss?' asked Mrs. Polwarth, anxiously. 'I've known girls that were spoiled in the old country by being sent to boarding-schools, and come back neither one thing nor the other. Spoiled for farm lasses, and not quite up to being ladies, in spite of their fal-lals and piano music. I'd break my heart if Tottie came to be like that.'

'I think you may put as much learning into this pretty little head as it will hold,' said Estelle, stroking the child's clustering ringlets. 'You'll always be a good girl, won't you, Tottie?'

'Tottie's mother's good girl,' said the small damsel, dimly conscious that she was under discussion, and then reading the tenderness aright in her visitor's face—that visitor so munificent in sugar plums and dolls—'and Miss Chaloner's good girl too.'

'I really believe you will, Tottie dear,' she said, lifting up the child and kissing her. 'May God bless all this prosperity to her, and to you and John also. Some people deserve their good fortune, and I am sure you both do.'

. . . . .

The days passed on—the final Saturday came, and still no course had shaped itself in the minds of her 'friends in council.' Tessie Lawless certainly might have furnished information, but no one knew her address.

They were not even sure whether she would feel justified in disclosing Lance's retreat. Stirling was still in much doubt—more than he cared to show — with regard to Miss Chaloner setting forth on a hopeless quest, when the daily mail arrived from Ballarat. Glancing through his letters, he stopped suddenly, arrested by the handwriting of an unopened letter. 'Lance Trevanion, by heaven!' he exclaimed, half aloud; 'just in time, too.' He tore it open. The fateful scroll commenced thus—

'Omeo, 10*th June* 185—.

'Here I am, my dear Charlie, so far restored to my old feelings that I can put pen to paper again, at the very idea of which I have shuddered till now. But the fresh mountain air—we had snow for breakfast this morning —has made a man of me again; that is, as much of a man as I ever shall be till I quit Australia for good.

'After I left my *last place*, I made tracks

for this digging. The most out-of-the-way, rough, rowdy hole among the mountains that ever gold was found in. It's a hard place to get to, harder still to get safely out of, populated, as it is, by all the scum of the colonies, and the rascaldom of half the world. Very different from Ballarat or poor old Growlers', though *I* have no reason to say so.

'How about the gold? you will say. *There is no mistake about that.* I have no mates. I am a "hatter," and have worked on my own hook—partly for occupation and partly for a blind. I have just made up my mind to prospect a reef which has been discovered near Mount Gibbo by a stock-rider called Caleb Coke. He is an ex-convict, "an old-hand," as they say here, and there are queer stories told about him, as indeed about most of the people in Omeo; but if the reef is rich—and they say nothing like it has been struck yet—I intend to have a shot at it.

'You would laugh to see my hut; it is as neat as a sailor's cabin. I lock my door when

I go out, and no one has "cracked the crib" yet. I bought a sea-chest, brass-bound and copper-fastened, which found its way up here on a pack-horse, and am supposed to have gold and jewels and all sorts of valuables therein. Henry Johnson is my purser's name, but the fellows, finding that I know Ballarat, have christened me "Ballarat Harry."

'To turn to business, I think the time has come for my getting over by degrees, and very quietly, as much of my credit balance with your bank as can be safely forwarded. My plan is, of course, to clear out for the most handy port, and put the sea between me and Australia. But there's time to think of that. If you can manage it without risk, send me the portmanteau I left with Jack. It contained letters, and a good many home souvenirs that I should like to see again. My watch and rings are in a small drawer; you can send the key in a letter. If you forward a draft for a thousand, payable at a Melbourne bank to H. Johnson, or bearer, I

can get it cashed here and buy gold at a heavy discount. It will be as good a way as any to transfer my share of Number Six hither, till I can transfer myself for good.

'Remember me to Jack and his wife, and kiss Tottie for me. I wonder if I shall ever see her again.

'For the present, adieu.—Yours ever,

'L. T.

'Address:

'Mr. Henry Johnson,

'Long Plain Creek,

'care of Barker & Jones,

'Storekeepers,

'Omeo.'

Here was a discovery!—a revelation! Stirling barely suffered himself to finish it before rushing over to Miss Chaloner with the astounding news. At first he dreaded the effect which it might have upon her, hopeless as she had been of late as to the whereabouts of the lost Lance. Still, he had

noted and admired her self-control when he divulged the sad intelligence of his imprisonment. He felt unable to withhold it from her.

Leaving the bank entirely to the control of his junior,—a young man to whom goldfield experience had imparted a discretion beyond his years,—he hastened over to Mrs. Delf's, where he met Estelle just about to start for her daily visit to Mrs. Polwarth.

She looked up suddenly. 'You have news?' she said. 'I am sure it is not bad tidings. Oh! can it be? Lance found? Is he safe? Does he know I am here?'

'My news is not quite so comprehensive as all that,' he answered, looking admiringly at her fine features, so suddenly illumined with a glow of tenderness, 'but I can say with truth that the good element prevails.'

'You have heard from him then?'

'Yes,' he answered; 'by this morning's post. I have the letter here.'

'And is there—oh! is there anything in

it which I should not read? May I—ought I to ask you to show it to me?' she cried.

Stirling, inwardly congratulating himself that his correspondent had refrained from mention of any member of the Lawless family, or indeed from any chance allusion which might have shocked the innocent trusting girl who now looked so imploringly at him, produced the precious missive promptly.

'Here is his letter; let him speak for himself, Miss Chaloner. There is no earthly reason why you should not see it. It will give you all the information you need. You will please excuse me until dinner-time.'

'I am for ever grateful to you,' she said, with the tears fast flowing from her shining eyes. 'I will walk down to the claim. I always feel at home there. I shall be able to think over my plans calmly if this letter changes them, as perhaps it may do.'

Thus they parted, he returning to his treasure-house just in time to see two rival

parties of diggers, literally laden with gold, who were making good time in a race for the bank door, each desiring to ensure a division of the precious metal before the establishment closed. Estelle, holding fast her coveted letter, which she pressed closely to her bosom, walked slowly along the track across the flat which led to Number Six, as one that hoards yet delays the savouring of a joy too sweet and precious for hasty possession.

Passing through the shaft-riddled portion of the creek meadow, where a rich but shallow deposit had caused every yard of ground to be pierced and tunnelled, she paused upon a grassy knoll where the outcrop of basaltic rock had checked the miners' search. Here the timber had been spared, and beneath a wide-spreading angophera Estelle Chaloner seated herself, and on a basaltic monolith, first folding her hands and making mute appeal to Heaven, commenced with hungry eyes to devour the invaluable missive.

She read and re-read—read again—word

by word, and sighed over the closing lines, then folding it carefully and placing it in her bosom, walked thoughtfully forward.

So he was at Omeo (such were her thoughts), a distant, rude, isolated region as she had heard—indeed his letter so described it. But what of that; he was safe, he was well, in recovered health and spirits—thank an all-merciful God for this much. He had even *hope*—the expectation of escape—of a life of happiness in England, or in some land beyond the reach of this strange country's harsh unequal laws.

Once safely at Wychwood, who would recognise in the proud heir of this historical estate the erstwhile miner, the unjustly treated prisoner? Then what would be her part in his future life? True, he made no reference to her; perhaps in a letter to a friend, chiefly on business matters, such were hardly likely. Still, to such a friend as Mr. Stirling, so nobly steadfast and true-hearted, he *might* have said a word about his poor Estelle in

the lonely manor-house, as he would picture her. But he was safe, free, almost happy in the enjoyment of his lately acquired liberty. That was happiness sufficient for the present. It would be time enough in the future to cherish other thoughts. Then walking forward with cleared brow and a resolved air she soon reached Mrs. Polwarth's cottage, before the door of which Tottie, evidently expectant, descried her and ran in to report.

'Why, you're quite late to-day, Miss,' said the good woman. 'I began to think you were never coming, and Tottie's been along the track as far as I'd let her. Sit ye down and rest. Is there anything fresh? We heard as the Ballarat men was talking of "rolling up" if the licenses wasn't lowered.'

'Yes, Mrs. Polwarth, there *is* news, but not about licenses; a letter has come by the mail to-day—this very day only, think of that!—from—from *him*.'

'Not from Mr. Lance; you don't say so, Miss? Who'd iver have thought on it?

And is he well, has he gotten oot o' the country? The Lord bless and keep him, wherever he is.'

'I trust He will, in His great goodness and mercy. It seems so wonderful, after all these weary months, that I should actually have his letter—his own letter written to Mr. Stirling—this week here—here!' and she drew forth the priceless treasure, as it seemed in her eyes, and again devoured it with hungry regard.

Then, half replying to Mrs. Polwarth's questions, half giving vent to long-pent-up feelings which, in the presence of a tried friend of her own sex, humble in social station as she might be, flowed freely and unrestrainedly, Estelle Chaloner poured her heart out. After which she experienced a feeling of intense relief, and was enabled to confer rationally with Mrs. Polwarth about her course of action.

'I had fully intended, as you know, to go into Ballarat on Monday,' she said, 'and

therefore there will be no change of plan. The difference will only be that before this dear letter came'—here she gazed earnestly at the well-known handwriting—'I had no earthly idea in what direction I should go after leaving Melbourne. Now I *do* know, and oh, how differently I feel!'

'Yes, I daresay,' said Mrs. Polwarth doubtfully; 'but then, Miss, how are you to get to Omeo? It's a mighty rough place, everybody says, a dreadful bad road, and worse a'most when you get there. Don't you think it would be more prudent-like to wait a bit and let Mr. Stirling write to him as you're here?'

'And allow him to think that I am afraid to come to any place where *he* lives? Perhaps induce him to leave his retreat for my sake and risk recapture? No! a hundred times no! I have not come so far to falter now.'

'But, my dear young lady, how will you get there? Jack heard some of the diggers talking about it, and they said all the tools and provisions and camp things had to be

took up on pack-horses. Nothing on wheels could get there. And what will you do then? you can't walk.'

'I should not like to walk, certainly,' said Miss Chaloner, with a smile. 'I wonder what some of my friends would say if they saw me trudging along with a knapsack on my back. Not but what I would do that if need were. But I can ride, fairly well too, so I will not let the want of a coach stop me, I promise you.'

'And you have friends in Melbourne, and you'll see them first, now won't you, Miss?' said the kind soul, devoutly hoping that such personages, if possessed of ordinary prudence, would interpose and prevent further romantic enterprises, of the success of which she in her own mind felt deeply distrustful.

'I shall see them, of course, particularly Mrs. Vernon, who was like a mother to me; but,' continued this headstrong and imperious young woman, 'all the Mrs. Vernons and Mrs. Grundys in Melbourne will not keep me from Omeo—from any place where *he* is.'

As she spoke she raised her head, her dark eyes flashed with sudden light, and her whole frame appeared instinct with defiance of difficulties and obstacles, how numerous soever.

Mrs. Polwarth seemed to recognise a familiar trait as she sighed and merely replied, 'It runs in the family, Miss. I see you won't be said. I could fancy as Mr. Lance was standin' before me this minute. Maybe you'll get through safe, please the Lord's mercy. There'll be some as'll pray for ye night and day.'

'I know that,' she said, taking the toil-worn hands in hers. 'No girl in a strange country ever found truer friends; I wonder at it sometimes by myself. But you know Heaven helps those who help themselves, and though I am a weak woman I feel that in my difficult path I must chiefly rely on myself. I have *his* happiness and safety to think of as well as my own.'

The more worldly-wise matron could only

press the delicate hand in hers, while the tears came to her eyes. 'If he had only thought as much about *her*!' she said inwardly.

But she held her peace as they walked together adown the track which led to the township.

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At a conversation which took place on the Sunday evening preceding Estelle's departure, she repeated her thanks to Stirling and Hastings for their kindness to herself and their unswerving friendship for Lance.

'I wish our companionship had been more effectual to protect him,' said the latter; 'but, speaking among friends, I may say that he was wilful—too much so for his own good. So have been many men, however, who have never paid such a heavy penalty. After this last news, however, the question is, how we are to help him?'

'I shall travel at once to this—to where he is,' said Estelle quickly. 'You did not expect me to do anything else, did you?'

'I am afraid that I did not,' he said, smiling; though he added gravely, 'None the less, both Stirling and I think it imprudent for you to take such a journey by yourself.'

'Yet I came here safely—even pleasantly.'

'Omeo is a very different place. It has the worst reputation of any goldfield yet discovered. The outlaws of all the colonies are gathered there. Police protection is a mockery; they have no "Launceston Mac" to regulate them, and the road is impracticable for wheels—well-nigh impassable, indeed.'

'All this sounds bad,' said Estelle, 'and, if I *could* be intimidated, might prevent my wishing to go. But I am past all that feeling. I must have one more talk with you and Mr. Stirling. But on Monday I sleep in Ballarat.'

'Of course Mrs. M'Alpine will be most happy to receive you again,' he said, rather ruefully; 'and next day the coach will take you to Melbourne. I wish the rest of the journey was as plain sailing. If you would accept me

as your escort to Omeo, and I could go, nothing would give me greater pleasure. But I am in honour bound to stay with my mate here and see our claim worked out, or I would leave to-morrow.'

'It is a great pity that Mr. Stirling can't shut up his bank and come too,' she replied, smiling. 'But I know enough now about mining matters to judge of the impossibility of your departing at a moment's notice. I have been wonderfully helped so far. It really appears miraculous. And I have the fullest faith that I shall not fall short of that aid which a merciful God provides for His helpless creatures in the future. I will write to you both, and hereby constitute Mr. Stirling as my banker and guardian while I remain in Australia.'

In this fashion it came to pass that on the Monday morning Estelle carried out her purpose of making the start—that all-important *premier pas* which is so often the insuperable difficulty in life.

The Growlers' Gully coach, departing with American punctuality at the appointed minute, bore her away again as box-seat passenger, and, not having more than two others besides the driver, went round by Mr. M'Alpine's cottage and deposited her at the remembered garden gate.

Before leaving she had a long and earnest conversation with Charles Stirling, whom she had grown to regard almost as a brother. His uniform gentleness of manner, his chivalrous courtesy and studious consideration for her in every possible particular, joined with a certain firmness in maintaining his opinion in matters of importance, had insensibly won upon her regard. She would have been no true woman had it not been so. Nor could she, from time to time, refrain from involuntarily drawing mental comparisons between her *fiancé* and his friend.

Their circumstances and surroundings being similar, why could not Lance have conducted himself with the prudence and self-respect

which characterised Mr. Stirling, and indeed Mr. Hastings also? Perhaps the former, from holding a responsible position, was necessarily more guarded by the proprieties; but there was Mr. Hastings, whom she had seen working with his mate Bob, dressed like an ordinary miner, more roughly living and lodging even than Jack Polwarth. Yet she could see that he bore himself in all respects as a gentleman, and that such rank by others was cheerfully accorded to him. Why could not Lance——? and then she sighed deeply and turned her thoughts abruptly into another channel.

It had been decided in council that Miss Chaloner should be suffered to pursue her journey towards Omeo, at any rate as far as Melbourne, when she would again place herself under the guardianship of Mrs. Vernon. After much difficulty, the friends prevailed upon her to promise that she would not commence the journey to Omeo until Mr. Vernon had arranged for, in his

opinion, a suitable escort. Thus reassured, she was permitted to depart, being seen off by Mrs. Polwarth and Mrs. Delf, besides a score or two of casual spectators and miners off work. These worthy fellows had gradually come to the conclusion that a young lady who was known to the Commissioner, and treated with such high consideration by Mr. Stirling, must be a person of rank and title. Indeed such a report gained common credence, and Estelle was long referred to in the chronicle of Growlers' as 'the lady in her own right as had come from England to see after poor Trevanion of Number Six.'

Before leaving, Estelle had volunteered to take charge of the portmanteau which Lance had mentioned in his letter as containing some of his much-cherished souvenirs and other possessions. But Stirling had doubted the propriety of her burdening herself with a heavy and presumably valuable package. It would be sure to cause her anxiety, and

from its very appearance might stimulate the cupidity of members of the lawless class, at that time by no means easy to evade while travelling. Both in her interest and Lance's he preferred to forward it by gold escort to an agent in Melbourne, who again would await the opportunity of police protection to send it on to Omeo. He would be in possession of Lance's receipt for it before she had reached Omeo; perhaps even before she had left Melbourne.

It was finally decided by the friends that Lance should not be informed of Estelle's arrival. 'It would only unsettle him,' she said. 'He might even come to Melbourne, and so run the risk of recapture. It will not be long before I rejoin him at Omeo, or the North Pole,' she added, with a smile, 'if he roams so far.'

The intervening stages were necessarily identical with those previously encountered. Mrs. M'Alpine was still hospitably eager to receive this wandering princess, as she evi-

dently considered her to be. She would not hear of her going on to Melbourne the following day, and Estelle, fearful of the appearance of insufficiently appreciating her unusual kindness, gracefully, though reluctantly, consented. Her hostess then arranged so that a discreet selection of the officials then resident at Ballarat should arrive in the evening. These were mostly young men, among whom Estelle was pleased to greet her first Ballarat acquaintance, Mr. Sub-Commissioner Dalton. Ladies were few and far between at that period of 'the field,' but those who accepted Mrs. M'Alpine's invitation showed that the exceptional circumstances amid which they lived and moved had wrought no change in manner or mental habitudes. As for the men, Estelle found them distinctly above the average in appearance, bearing, and accomplishments. These last Mrs. M'Alpine unobtrusively brought forward. Then it appeared that this one was well known as an artist; another sang 'like an angel,' as one of

his feminine admirers expressed it, playing his own accompaniments on the piano; a third was a distinguished performer in private theatricals, while all talked well and amusingly. A rather extended course of travel, continental and otherwise, joined with army and navy reminiscences, seemed to be common to all. Mr. M'Alpine had arrived too, from some mining town with an aboriginal name, and, much to Estelle's surprise, was a punctiliously courteous and chivalrous elderly personage, mild and almost deferential in manner to ladies, and possessing a vein of quiet humour which aroused unexpected merriment from time to time,—very different, indeed, from the stern, inflexible Rhadamanthus whom she had pictured in her imaginings of the terrible 'Launceston Mac.'

When the evening came to an end—not particularly early, it must be confessed—and the piano and whist table were succeeded by a modest but very cheerful supper, Estelle came to the conclusion that she had never

seen so many entertaining, cultured, and, in a sense, distinguished people gathered together in one small room in her life. That it should be her experience in this curious corner of the remote antipodes was the crowning marvel of the whole.

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Melbourne again! which — so accommodating is our mental to our bodily vision— seemed quite a small London after Ballarat and Growlers'.

Mrs. Vernon, who was just about organising one of her regular winter parties, hailed Estelle's arrival with unaffected joy. This was rather dashed when she understood her guest's intention to depart for Omeo at the earliest possible moment. If the truth must be told, she considered the discovery of Lance's abiding-place at Omeo to be an unalloyed misfortune. This view of the case was of course unexpressed, out of deference to Estelle's feelings, who made it — the announcement—with such unfeigned pleasure

that her hostess could not, for pity's sake, forbear the conventional words of sympathy.

'But, my dear, you cannot possibly go to that dreadful Omeo at present, if indeed at all. It was only yesterday that I heard Mr. Vernon telling some young man (a young man, my dear!) that he advised him to wait till the winter was nearly over before he started for Omeo, as the roads were positively dangerous.'

'I will wait any reasonable time, and I shall certainly be guided by Mr. Vernon's kind advice,' the girl said; 'but I am resolved to reach Omeo before the spring.'

'"A wilful woman," quoted the old lady, "must, I suppose, have her way," like a wilful man, but I am charmed to see that you recognise the propriety of consulting Mr. Vernon. He has business relations with Omeo—what they are I have not the faintest idea—mining requisites, I presume—everything from picks and shovels to pianos and cornopeans—so that he will know how to

manage the transport service for you. And now, my dear, come and see your room.'

Mrs. Vernon's home was enticing. A roomy, well-furnished modern house, the upper windows of which commanded a far-reaching view of the waters of the harbour and the bluffs and headlands trending easterly towards a dim and mighty forest world, beyond which again rose mountain peaks. A broad verandah protected it equally from winter rain and summer heat. The gardens, filled with exotics of every land, sloped down, with winding walks amid trim grass lawns and thickets of ornamental shrubs, to the waters of the Yarra. Exclusive enough for meditation and rambling walks, beautiful also with the carefully-guarded flowers which the half-tropical summer and mild winter of the south permit to develop in rarest beauty, had Estelle desired a restful retreat wherein to stay her pilgrim feet for a season, no pleasanter spot, no more alluring bower, could she have found. But such loitering in the

path of duty, synonymous in her case with the passion around which the tendrils of her heart—the heart of a self-controlled, habitually reserved woman—entwined, was not for Estelle Chaloner. Pleased and grateful as she could not fail to be with Mrs. Vernon's motherly warmth and kindly tendance, she told herself that she would rather have been in a stage-coach, rumbling along the roughest road towards Omeo, the goal of all her thoughts and aspirations, than playing her part mechanically among the pleasant society people seated around Mr. Vernon's handsomely appointed dinner-table.

As for that gentleman himself, he vied with his wife in welcoming his prodigal daughter, as he persisted in calling her.

'We have adopted you, my dear Miss Chaloner; ask Mrs. Vernon if we haven't. We wept till bedtime after your departure, didn't we, Mary? and now that our daughter that we lost is found, what do I hear about her going away again? It can't be done.

It's against Scripture; ask Mr. Chasuble here if it isn't. The fatted calf is doomed, and she must stay for the feast.'

'I daresay you won't find me an undutiful daughter,' she replied smilingly, 'but you must wait till I have returned from the wilderness before feasting will be appropriate. I have seen little or nothing, so far, of the rude and lawless waste I was led to expect —on the contrary, refinement and courtesy seem indigenous to Australia.'

'Oh! that's all very fine,' laughed back Mrs. Vernon; 'you've been spoiled at Ballarat, but you mustn't expect to find the country full of handsome Goldfields Commissioners, six feet high, and crammed full of accomplishments—like Mr. Dalton, or even Mr. Annesley, whom you saw here. There *are* places so different.'

'Which we won't describe to-night, shall we, my dear?' Mr. Vernon interpolated, appealing to his wife. 'Miss Chaloner shall do as she likes, as the daughter of the

house, while here and afterwards. If she wants to go to the South Pole, John Vernon & Co. will charter a ship for her, or a camel train; if Fort Bourke requires her presence, only give us a little time—that is all I ask.'

## CHAPTER XX

Those adventurous wayfarers only who have traced the sources of the Snowy River, which in its southward course pierces the fertile district of Gippsland, are familiar with the strange wild region which lies between it and the northern watershed, where the Ovens, the Mitta Mitta, and the King rivers swell with their hurrying waters the Mississippi of Australia. The scenery is of a weird and wondrous majesty. Far as eye can reach, a verdurous plain extends—a mountain park, in truth, it may be called, differing from almost any other such formation in Australia. Three thousand feet above the sea, a sheet of snow in the mid-winter, it is a prairie waving with giant grasses when remorseless suns are

scorching the heart of the continent into barrenness. Standing on the northern edge of the Dargo plateau, what a landscape bursts upon the view! Mount Feathertop, divided by a ravine two thousand feet in depth from Mount Bogong, with Kosciusko, king of Austral Alps, like twin Titans, rise snow-crowned in awful majesty amid the mist and cloud rack of the illimitable mountain world. Storm-swept and desolate is this region in winter. The strayed traveller wanders beneath an endless succession of wooded peaks, descends abysmal glens, and seems doomed to traverse eternally the unbroken solitudes of the primeval forest.

Here first arose the hamlet, later on the mining township, of Omeo, taking its name from the lonely lake so named by the wild tribes who had hunted on its borders and fished in its depths from immemorial ages. Who shall count the years from the launching of the first frail bark canoe on its lonely waters? Situated in closest proximity to the

region of snows, which, if not eternal, commence to crown the mountain summits in the early autumn, it is separated from the more civilised portions of New South Wales and Victoria by roads which border precipices, by mountain tracks, known only to the cattle-drover and the horse-stealer, which, overhanging rivers thickly strewn with granite crags, offer suicide on easy terms to the careless or the despondent.

Rivers, full-fed from a thousand springs which have their sources in these mountains, rush from unexplored heights in the spring-time, or murmur musically the long green summer through, when the great levels of Australian deserts are sun-baked as the plains of Hindostan.

Here dwell in scattered families or sparsely settled hamlets the various classes of Australian highlanders. Hardy, active, fearless are they as their Scottish prototypes;—originally recruited from the wandering stock-rider, or in later years the lonely gold-seeker pros-

pecting the basaltic dykes and quartz-filled fissures of the foot-hills of the Australian Alps. Herds of half-tamed or wholly wild cattle and horses roam the profuse pastures, richly verdant during the short summer, though snow-covered and deathlike during the winter months. Here, late lingering and entrapped, they often perish, a company of skeletons within a circle formed by unavailing trampling of the surrounding snow only remaining in the spring to show the operation of nature's stern, irrevocable laws.

Lonely and chiefly silent this mountain land — dividing the watersheds of three colonies — pierced by precipitous defiles — barred of access by rugged ranges, the only means of crossing the savage region being by dangerous tracks skirting terrific precipices, sometimes, as is the well-known King River pass, narrow, elevated, almost in mid air, with abysmal deeps on either side.

The first dwellers in these dread solitudes were men inured to every peril of the Aus-

tralian bush, to whom the faint trail of the wilderness was familiar as the field-path to the village rustic. Strayed cattle and ownerless horses accumulated in the virgin mountain pastures. These were at first driven to the nearest market by tracks only known to the outlaws of the waste, or their confederates the stock-riders in charge of rarely visited cattle-stations. Suddenly the trade developed, owing to the higher prices ruling since the gold eruption. An organised system of horse and cattle stealing arose. Outlying lots of fat cattle were 'cut out' or separated from the border herds of Monaro or Gippsland, and crossed into opposite colonies. Detection in such cases was well-nigh impossible. Much of the illegal work was done at night. If pursued, the tracks were purposely blinded by station cattle driven across the trail, while, from the rugged character of the country, strangers were at a special disadvantage. Horses averaging from fifty to a hundred pounds each, if capable of

drawing a wash-dirt cart or transporting a digger's movables from one mining district to another, were profitable plunder.

Chief among these *caterans* of the southern highlands—raiders, however, of a lower grade than their Scottish prototypes—was the well-known and deeply distrusted Caleb Coke—an ex-convict who had 'served his time,'—that is, completed the term of penal servitude to which he had been originally sentenced. He had graduated in a school of lawless license tacitly permitted by the customs of the country. Commencing as a stock-rider on Monaro Plains, then a wild unsettled region, he and his convict companions reigned unchecked amid the aboriginal tribes. Reports of capricious cruelty or savage vengeance against the blacks were more than whispered. Wild tales were told of lawless deeds—of inoffensive natives wantonly shot down in satisfaction for stock killed or missing—of reckless indulgence in all the baser passions by these modern buccaneers. The lack of

police supervision enabled them to revel in every species of lawlessness unchecked and unchallenged, and as surely as any deed involving exceptional craft or cruelty came to light the name of Caleb Coke was rarely absent from the recital.

Rudely reared and wholly uneducated, this man represented the type of Englishman that in earlier days helped to found the reputation of British sailors and soldiers. Smugglers, mutineers, or buccaneers they might become, but, whatever their faults, they possessed the cardinal quality of courage in a degree unequalled by any other nation.

Scarcely above the middle height, and possessing no remarkable muscular development, Coke had proved himself the possessor of a measure of endurance and sinewy strength which rendered him totally indifferent to the hardships of a life in the wilderness. Heat or cold, night or day, on foot or on horseback, all seemed alike to Caleb Coke. Like many of the early stock-

riders, though born in English hamlets and grown to manhood before expatriation, the erstwhile poachers, smugglers, or deer-stealers took kindly to the wild life of the interior of Australia. Long used to watch the habits and follow the haunts of fur and feather, the tracking of the half-tamed herds of cattle and horses came natural to the quick eyes, from childhood studious of the waste. Those among these exiled shepherds and stock-riders whom favourable conditions of life tended to soften saved their money, acquired property, and founded families not undistinguished in the future. On the other hand, all whom misfortune had soured or crime indurated, found in their newly acquired quasi-freedom the means of safely engaging in practices more secret but not less nefarious than of old, or criminal operations on a scale hitherto unprecedented.

With the formation of a rich goldfield at Omeo, the centre of a proverbially lawless region and a roving population, the results

may be imagined. Cash became plentiful, and was habitually carried in large sums on the persons of gold-buyers and other speculators. Crime for a while seemed about to overshadow the land. Fierce of aspect, ruthless in beak and talon, 'the eagles were gathered together.' Had there been an Asmodeus of the mountain, how plainly would he have descried, almost without the aid of *le diable boiteux*, the Alsatia from which, as surely as the levin-bolt from the thunder-cloud, wrong and rapine were destined to result.

With his habitual want of caution, Lance Trevanion made the acquaintance of Caleb Coke soon after he reached Omeo. That worthy, wily and unscrupulous, found means to ingratiate himself with the stranger, apparently flush of money, and no novice in mining. He made a point of providing horses when there was a newly-discovered 'rush' to inspect. In certain ventures, as so often happens, when the broad road is to be

traversed, all his 'tips' proved correct. His advice, *quoad hoc*, seemed uniformly trustworthy. Coke, however, had an advantage on his side of which Trevanion little dreamed. Before long he was fully posted in Lance's history; whereas, of Mr. Coke's eventful career, beyond the careless chatter of goldfields, Lance knew nothing. Still less did he suspect aught of the sinister influence behind Coke. Not many days had elapsed after Lance had resolved to take up his abode at Omeo before he received a letter from Tessie Lawless, to whom he had sent a few lines by his returning guide. It was addressed to Mr. Harry Johnson, miner, to the care of the chief storekeeper, a man of multifarious trusts and responsibilities, keeping the post-office among other duties, and being entrusted with all deposits, from a parcel of gold to a quartz-crushing machine—from a 'last will and testament' to a baby 'to be left till called for.'

Tessie Lawless's missive—the outflow from

a heart as true and faithful as ever beat in a woman's bosom—ran as follows—

'MELBOURNE HOSPITAL.

'When you receive this you will be safe—safe from persecutors, and once more—oh! that I should have to write such words—a free man again. What misery and degradation you have suffered! my poor dear unjustly punished ——. I dare not even write your name for fear of—of consequences. But I shall be proud and happy all my life through that I was able to contrive to set you free—free! I have seen Mr. Wheeler since, and I could not help laughing, anxious and miserable as I have been, and am, at the way in which the affair was managed.

'You will see by the heading of my letter where I live. I am not a patient, but I was so restless and anxious until I heard of your safety that I took a situation as nurse in the Melbourne Hospital. There has been a good deal of sickness—fever, rheumatism, and so

on—since the gold, and we are all kept hard at work night and day. I was always fond of helping sick people, and the work suits me exactly. So now you know where to find me. Address—"Nurse Hester Lawless, Fever Ward."

'I know, of course, that though Omeo is an out-of-the-way place, you stand a chance of being arrested at any time. So, for *my* sake, if you value my feelings, be as careful as you can. Don't make friends unless you are certain about them. You have *paid dearly for that*, haven't you? My cousin Kate married Trevenna soon after the trial. They are somewhere about Monaro, and not likely to come across you, thank goodness. He doesn't treat her well, they say, so I can fancy what their life is. *It serves her right!* You mustn't think me cruel, but I never shall forgive her as long as I live. I heard that Ned had got out of gaol, but am not sure whether it is true. Poor Ned! he was not all bad. I hope he may clear out to another colony, and keep straight for the future.

'I have been rambling on, but must now say good-bye. Good-bye, too, in earnest. I shall not write again unless I hear anything, and want to send you warning. You know my heart—I need not say that if you only tell me to "come" I will follow you to the end of the world. I do not advise you to do it—the other way, indeed—but L—— T—— must judge for himself; though he might easily win a grander wife, but he will never never find a more loving and devoted mate than poor TESSIE.'

'A truer woman never breathed!' Lance ejaculated, as he read this letter in the lonely hut. 'But for her I should still be in those beastly hulks — perhaps chucked overboard some morning, with a round shot for a steadier! What in the world shall I do? What can I write to her? If she comes up here it will be sure to make people talk. They always try to find out more about a digger that's married than single, and if they

find out too much, that infernal Dayrell, or some other ambitious trooper, will have the office given him, and *both* of us made miserable for life. No! she's the dearest little girl in the world, and I may as well make up my mind to tour California or South Sea Islands with her for a wife, as she says. England must be for me a foreign land henceforth, and Estelle—poor Estelle—a beautiful dream! England's no country for a man with a stain on his honour.

'"My native land, good-bye!" as Byron says. *He* never saw it again, for that matter. Heigho! I wonder if I shall? Something tells me his fate will be mine. An early death, though there is no Greece to fight for—no such luck in store for Lance Trevanion as a patriot's grave—a hero's tomb. I used to think of such things once, strange to say. How queer it seems that a soldier's death in the open, and so many many other things are henceforth for me *impossible*.

'I see nothing for it but to hang on here,

putting the crowd off the scent by working, talking, dressing like any other digger, till I get my share of Number Six by degrees from Charlie Stirling, — trump that he is,— then clear for Callao or 'Frisco without beat of drum, taking Tessie Lawless with me.'

. . . . .

Both before and since the conviction of Ned Lawless, who was one of the originators of the Omeo cattle-stealing gang, Lawrence Trevenna had been a partner in crime, a sharer in ill-gotten profits. He it was at Eumeralla whom the miners, the police, and indeed Tessie Lawless herself, had seen from time to time, and had mistaken for Lance Trevanion. They might well be excused. With some allowance for discrepancies in speech and manner, only observable when the two men stood side by side, few people could have told the difference.

His nature, inheriting the strongest proclivities to lawlessness of every shade and scope, needed but the occurrence of suitable conditions to develop into the commission

of the darkest deeds. The comparatively easy profession of stock-lifting had, after his first chance wayfaring to the Monaro district within a few months after he quitted the ship, commended itself to him as an exciting and lucrative line of life. Athletic, bold, and attractive after a fashion, he had singled out Kate Lawless as the object of his admiration before the migration of the family to Ballarat. Becoming aware of the reckless girl's flirtation with his rival and antagonist of the voyage, he had sworn to take a deadly revenge. With the aid of the sergeant, and acting upon the girl's jealous mood, he had been enabled to gratify his hatred to the full; and now he heard through Caleb Coke, whose information from various sources was rarely inaccurate, that his enemy had escaped from prison and was actually living in Omeo.

Trevenna's practice in connection with the 'duffing racket,' as Coke would have expressed it, was to travel through from Monaro with drafts of stolen animals and to await the

arrival of others of the gang at Dargo, a place about fifty miles from Omeo. The men who met him were not suspected in their own neighbourhood, and as the stock were unknown locally, were enabled to drive them down the Snowy River into Gippsland or into Melbourne market by devious ways, known but to themselves, without arousing suspicion. Thus the mining and general population of Omeo had rarely seen and never noticed Trevenna. His beat lay on and around the Monaro district. Occasionally, when conference with Coke was necessary, he met him at the hut at Mount Gibbo, a lonely and rarely visited spot. As far as the Omeo people were concerned, Trevenna was, to all intents and purposes, an unknown man. It was, in a sense, against his interest to meet with Lance Trevanion at present. He therefore took general precautions against such an event, keeping himself, however, well posted up, through Coke, as to his rival's movements.

The destined meeting took place, however, after a fashion wholly unexpected by either, Fate proving, as of old, too strong for the machinations of mortals.

Trevanion had appointed a day to go with Coke to one of the newly opened reefs which bade fair to make Omeo the premier goldfield of Australia. It was at no great distance from the old man's hut. Lance had borrowed a horse and ridden to the point indicated by Coke, and after an hour's ride found the reef which they had come to inspect. It was in truth wonderfully rich,—the stones 'strung together with gold,' as the prospectors expressed it. Lance secured a share which could hardly fall short of an astounding profit as the claim developed; and when Coke suggested riding to his hut for a meal he readily assented.

The day was fine, the mountain air clear and bracing. The view, as they gradually ascended one of the foot-hills of the main Alpine range, was far-stretching and majestic. At the distance of a few miles, but apparently

almost overhanging the lonely hut,—a substantial building, very solidly constructed,—arose the sullen shape of Mount Gibbo, snow-capped, and ever bearing on its granite ribs the marks of the Alpine winter.

A couple of savage-looking kangaroo dogs and a collie of suspicious aspect walked forward from the massive hut-door, which Lance noticed was carefully secured by a padlock. A narrow bridge of logs led across a sedgy runlet, which, like many mountain streams, was unfordable, except in occasional spots. From the hut could be seen any man or beast approaching at a considerable distance. The idea crossed Lance's mind that in the middle ages it would have been a most suitable site for the castle of a robber baron. He smiled as he thought that perhaps his friend Mr. Coke was only a later survival of those picturesque tax-gatherers.

Dismounting at the door, Coke hung his bridle-rein over a wooden peg driven into a stump close by, and, motioning to his

companion to do likewise, unlocked the door.

'Hold on!' he said, as he pushed back the heavy door cautiously, and, leaning forward, pulled out by the collar a brindled bull-dog of such ferocious aspect that Lance drew back involuntarily.

'You seem to believe in dogs, Coke,' said he, as he noted the savage brute's red eye and grim jaw half approvingly. 'He would be rather a surprise to any one that called upon you when you were not at home.'

'He's not easy stopped when he goes for the throat,' said the old man, dragging the brute along by the collar and fastening him to a chain stapled into a section of a hollow log, which served as a kennel. 'He's a queer customer, is Lang. He dashed near settled a cove as got into the hut once by the winder when I was away. I was just back in time not to have to bury him, but it was a near thing.'

'One would think you had something valu-

able in your hut that you have to guard it so well,' said Lance, looking at the dog, now lying down licking his paws and showing his formidable teeth from time to time.

'Maybe I have, maybe I haven't,' said the old man sourly. 'Anyhow, I don't like people coming about my place when I'm away. I've always kept a dorg or two as wasn't safe at close quarters. They know it now, black fellows and white both, and lets us alone, eh, Lang, old man?'

The dog gave a low growl as he spoke, while at the same moment the collie and the kangaroo hounds raised their heads, and turning towards the road, which wound along a rocky incline from the eastward, gave a joint whimper, and seemed on the point of breaking out into a chorus of barking. Lance, looking instinctively in the same direction, saw a horseman emerging from a patch of timber, nearly a mile distant, and apparently riding at speed towards the hut. The dogs, however, appeared to have come to a conclusion

in their own minds favourable to the approaching stranger, inasmuch as they lay down and awaited events.

'D—n him,' growled the old man, as, shading his eyes mechanically with his hands, he gazed searchingly at the horseman. 'What the devil brings him here now?'

'You know him then?' queried Lance.

'Know him? Well, yes,' answered Coke, with the tone of a man disgusted with things in general. 'Maybe you do too, and if you'll take a fool's advice, you'll neither make nor meddle with him. He's pretty hot property, is Larry Trevenna.'

'My God!' groaned out Lance, as his face flushed high, and then grew pale to the lips. 'This is more than I could have hoped for. Now look here, Coke,' and he turned upon the old man with a subdued wrath in every look and tone that, fearless as he was, awed the ruffianly elder. 'This Trevenna did me the worst wrong that one man can do another. Through his villainy I have been chained,

starved, gaoled, treated like a dog—falsely accused, too, if ever man was. If I shoot the infernal hound as he pulls up his horse, I should be doing a good deed. If I don't, it is only that he may feel that, man to man, I am his master, and the punishment I intend to give him will not be so soon over. But if you interfere, by word or deed, by God! I'll shoot the pair of you like dogs.'

He touched his pistol as the last words came from his lips in low concentrated tones. His chest heaved, his hands were clenched until the muscles in his bare arms stood out like cordage, and the lurid fire in his deep-set eyes glowed as though ready to leap forth with volcanic flame. The resistless force of long-repressed passion asserted itself at this supreme moment.

The crafty veteran recognised the necessity of neutrality, and assumed his position with promptitude. 'Larry must take his chance. It's dashed little I care which way it goes. I'll see fair play, anyhow.'

There was little time to say more. The horseman had crossed the creek and, riding at a hand-gallop, pulled up at the door, throwing his bridle-reins, stock-rider fashion, on the ground, and leaving the hard-ridden hackney, a grand three-parts bred animal, to recover his wind and graze on the green tussock grass till he should need him.

Without apparently taking notice of the stranger who, in ordinary miner's garb, stood by the old man,—most probably taking him for a wandering prospector or hard-up 'hatter,'—he called out, advancing the while—

'I say, old King of the Duffers, do you know there's half-a-dozen chaps from Monaro waiting for you at Dobbs' Hole? They've a stunning lot of nags with them, so you'd better scratch all you know and get there before dark. Who's this cove? Perhaps he'll give us a hand? I must have a pot of tea first, though.'

He moved towards the hut door, near which

Lance and the old man were standing. Lance stepped forward.

'So we meet again, Lawrence Trevenna?'

Trevenna was no coward. Still the sudden apparition of a deadly enemy—as if he had arisen from the earth — would disturb the equilibrium of most men. He started back. But a life filled with risk and imminent peril had schooled his nerves. He smiled, as if in apparent good-fellowship.

'By Jove! So it's *you*, Trevanion? Who'd have thought of seeing you here? Well, you've slipped the clinks, it seems. I was always dashed sorry you got into that scrape so deep. You'd better go shares with Coke and the rest of us in this lay. There's money in it—pots and pots of it.'

'D—n you and your money too, you scoundrel!' shouted Lance, advancing upon him with hate burning in his eyes and vengeance written on every line of his countenance. 'You! — You propose to me to share in your villainies? Have not you

and your accomplices worked me ruin enough already? Put up your hands!'

Trevenna smiled and took his ground. Among the younger members of the lawless gang with which he had allied himself he had seen many a similar encounter, half or wholly in earnest. And in the pugilistic practice so popular among Australian youths of all classes, Larry Trevenna, to which cognomen he had been, for greater convenience, reduced, was held to be, if not the very cleverest of that wild band, so near the top of the class that there were few—very few—that cared to arouse his anger.

He had, as he supposed, advanced considerably in the science of the prize ring, and fondly trusted that the fast and vigil inseparable from a bushman's life would render him more than a match for any infernal swell (as he would have phrased it), especially one who had so lately 'done time,' and been therefore precluded from the enjoyment of fresh air and exercise.

Old Caleb Coke's rugged features writhed themselves into a saturnine grin as he watched the savage onset with an inherited instinctive interest.

'Dashed if I ever seen a better-matched pair,' he growled out, half unconsciously. 'I'd a walked twenty mile when I was a youngster to see a battle like it. It's even betting—Larry's a quick hitter and pretty fit, but I doubt he's met his match. Well, it's d—d little to me who wins. First blood to Larry, by —— !'

By this time the two men were hard at it. The heavy blows on face and body, which in such a contest fall fast and furious, sounded strangely clear in the rarified mountain atmosphere—the old stock-rider and the dogs the sole spectators. These last—comrades of mankind under such ever-changing conditions—looked on with manifest interest. The bulldog, indeed, until warned by a kick from his master, being minded to smash his chain and make a third in the encounter. The

blow from Trevenna to which Coke had alluded had split the flesh above the cheek, showing the white bone underneath, as if gashed by a knife. Its effect was due less to want of skill on Lance's part than to his desperate determination to get to close quarters with his foe. And, indeed, all unheeding of the punishment, which would have staggered another man less iron-sinewed and agile, he forced his opponent before him with a succession of blows, delivered with such terrific power and rapidity that Trevenna's guard was completely broken in, eventually sending him to the earth, half stunned and motionless.

Lawrence Trevenna had underrated his foe in more than one respect. During the few weeks which he had spent in Omeo Lance Trevanion had worked harder than he had ever done in his life before. Partly to dull the memories of the past, as well as to quiet the haunting fear of apprehension, he had toiled incessantly. The keen air, the healthy appetite, the free intercourse with his fellow-

men, had restored him to fullest strength and activity. Never in his life, as he stepped forward to meet his foe, had he felt more fully conscious of muscular strength and deer-like elasticity—those glorious physical gifts with which only early manhood is endowed.

As they fronted each other for the second time, face to face and eye to eye, as is the wont of men of British race in such a contest, Coke could not fail to be impressed with their extraordinary likeness to each other, and the similarity of their general cast of feature. The colour of the hair was identical, and but for a slight deviation in the direction of coarseness on the one hand, and that indescribable something which belongs to the man of birth on the other, they could hardly have been distinguished from each other by a casual spectator. In their eyes, so remarkable in both, burned in that hour the deadliest fire of hate, the difference alone being that while it glowed furnace-bright in the orbs of Lance

Trevanion, Trevenna's glare, in demoniacal malice, resembled the rage of a wild beast.

'By ——,' said the old man, as once more he marked the blood-stained faces of the desperate combatants, who again went at each other with silent fury, 'I could fancy as they was brothers. They ought to shake hands and travel the country. What a circus they'd be able to run. Ha! Larry's down agen. The Ballarat cove's too good for him.'

It was even so. For a short time only it appeared as if the issue was doubtful. There was but little thought of evasion or parrying of blows on either side. The terrific rally with which the second round ended would have brought to a close more than one world-famous fight. But Lance Trevanion fought as though each arm—like the Familiar of the enchanter—wielded an iron flail. And when Lawrence Trevenna went down, beaten dead and senseless from the last tremendous 'upper cut,' it was evident that he would not come to time.

'That last left-hander knocked him out,' said the old man, with a grin of qualified approval, while a strange expression lurked in his evil eyes. 'It ain't no use follerin' it up, as I see. Dip that pannikin in the bucket while I sluish his neck a bit. You ain't settled him this time, Harry, but it's a d—d close shave.'

'He deserves death at my hands a dozen times over,' said Lance, gazing down upon the fallen man, as Coke raised his bleeding face, and, after an interval, succeeded in restoring animation, while the dogs stood around licking their lips, as if the savour of blood had aroused their ferocious instincts. 'But I have done with him for the present. Let him cross my path again at his peril.'

Thus speaking, he turned to where his horse had been secured and made preparations for departure, waiting, however, in order to satisfy himself as to the condition of his late antagonist. That personage, after a few minutes, was sufficiently recovered to raise

himself to a sitting posture, and eventually to his feet, when he supported himself by leaning against a tree.

But though temporarily worsted in the conflict, Trevenna had no whit abated of the ferocity with which he had commenced the encounter.

Declining, with a wave of the hand, the proffer of bush hospitality by the old man, Lance Trevanion made as though to mount his horse, when Trevenna shook his hand, and, with a voice hoarse and almost inarticulate, arrested his departure.

'Stop!' he said. 'I want a word with Trevanion before he goes. You've had the best of it now. I didn't think you were so good, blast you! But I'll see you at my feet yet. I've got the girl you were so sweet on, and you may thank her for being what you are—a runaway convict; d'ye hear that, Lance Trevanion? Kate Lawless is my wife now, and d—d well broke to come to heel when I crack the whip, you take your oath.

I've got square with you so far, and by ——— !' and here the ruffian swore a blasphemous oath, 'I'll be more than even with you yet.'

He paused, apparently more from exhaustion than from other reasons, for his disfigured face, all blood-stained though it was, grew ghastly pale as he swayed forward as though he would have fallen.

Lance rode towards him, and for an instant raised his hand; then gazing at him with deepest contempt, made answer—

'No doubt you have treated your unfortunate wife as only brutes like yourself are given to do. You are repaid in some slight degree for any cruelty to her, little as she deserves it at my hands. As for you, you scoundrel, I will shoot you like a dog if you come across me again. So I give you fair warning.'

Then Lance Trevanion mounted his horse, unheeding of food or shelter. For, as if the elemental powers had awaited the issue of the conflict, the sky was suddenly overcast, the

wind arose and wailed stormily. The ranges were blotted out by driving mists, and without warning one of the sudden storms of a mountain region broke wrathfully over the plain. Another man might have sought protection. At any other time such a thought might have crossed his mind. But the fierce spirit of Lance Trevanion in that hour of overwrought feeling joyed in the elemental turmoil. Facing the tempest, he sent the spurs into his horse and drove recklessly into the very teeth of the storm; the drenching rain, the blinding lightning, the thunder rolling above him and echoing along the mountain crags, only serving as distractions to the yet fiercer tumult raging within. Two hours' desperate riding over flooded creeks, through forest and flat, rocky ridge and sedgy morass, brought him to Omeo. The storm-swept streets were deserted, the stores and hotels filled. Pulling up at the door of his hut, he unsaddled his horse, whose heaving flanks sufficiently attested the pace at which he had

covered the distance, and turned him loose, with all reasonable expectation that he would discover his owner's abode, after the manner of 'mountain' horses, accustomed from colthood to find their way to particular localities, wholly irrespective of times and seasons.

This duty performed, he unlocked the door, carrying the saddle and bridle inside with him. His steed trotted off briskly, after a preliminary shake, and apparently made a straight course for his home. Nor was the act of turning him loose on that wild winter evening amid the still driving rain and bitter wind in any sense cruel and unfeeling. The stock-rider to whom he belonged would remark in such a case that the rain would wash his coat clean from mud or sweat stain. He had never been shod in his life, never known a rug or a stable, and was as impervious to disease of the throat or lungs as his ancient comrades, the wild cattle of the snowfields.

## CHAPTER XXI

For some days after his encounter with Trevenna, Lance Trevanion avoided as much as possible going into the township. He devoted himself to working steadily at his claim at the reef, to which he had gone before the adjournment to Caleb Coke's hut with unexpected results.

His first impulse was to prepare for sudden departure. Trevenna, as a cheap and obvious form of revenge, would probably inform the police of his identity without delay. He shuddered at the idea of recapture—nothing, of course, could be easier than to send word to the nearest police station that prisoner Trevanion, lately escaped from the hulk *President*, and for whom a reward of no trifling

amount was offered in the *Police Gazette*, was living as 'Harry Johnson,' the miner, just outside of Omeo township.

Yet, upon further reflection, other considerations presented themselves: Coke and Trevenna were evidently 'working' this horse and cattle business together. They would not, presumably, be too anxious to bring the police near to the scene of their illegal practices. They would assume also that he, Trevanion, if recaptured, might reveal much to their disadvantage. Besides, he was now receiving weekly drafts to a considerable amount from Charles Stirling. These he exchanged through Barker & Co., the storekeepers at Omeo, for drafts on a Melbourne bank, keeping up the appearance of a mining speculator by buying parcels of gold from time to time, which were transmitted to Melbourne by escort—consigned to the same bank. He was loth to interrupt such satisfactory financial operations, while proceeding in a manner so favourable to his project of escape. In a few

more weeks, if nothing happened in the meantime, a sum would be placed to his credit in Melbourne with which he could safely embark for San Francisco, Valparaiso, or the Islands, leaving the remainder to be sent after him.

Thus arguing, he determined to trust to the chapter of accidents, and, unless he received further warning, to abide the issue. Besides this, he believed that Coke entertained a friendly feeling towards him; even that he might depend upon him for notice in case Trevenna was determined to play the informer.

As matters turned out, Trevenna and Coke were at that very time maturing plans with which the sudden arrival of additional police would have seriously interfered. But of this determination, as well as of its scope and intention, Lance Trevanion was ignorant.

He had not, of course, been able to keep out of sight and observation of his fellow-miners at Omeo. A parcel of gold had been offered for purchase by his friend Barker, and

as it was rather larger than usual, he felt bound to go into Omeo to inspect it. His face—decisively as the battle had terminated in his favour—still bore the signs of the severe punishment which he had received. And all unheeding as he had been of the pain during the heat and fury of the conflict, the disfiguring bruises and cuts were none the less *en évidence* for days after the affair.

But this condition of facial disarrangement was too familiar to all classes of society at Omeo to cause more than faint surprise or trivial comment. 'Been having a friendly round and slipped the gloves off, Harry?' said the storekeeper. 'I didn't think there was a chap on the field that could paste you like that!'

Lance muttered something about 'accidents will happen,' and so on. 'Tell you all about it some other time.' Yet though not denying the impeachment, he showed so little desire to be questioned upon the matter that the store-

keeper, a shrewd person, dropped the subject and addressed himself to the more important business of the gold purchase.

This was concluded, and the gold safely placed in the fireproof safe, at that time a necessary part of every storekeeper's outfit, there to await the monthly or fortnightly escort. By far the greater portion of the gold so purchased was sent to town by escort—the protection of the police troopers being in general considered sufficient. In spite of the perils of the road, there were, however, always to be found men, fearless or foolhardy, as the case might be, who preferred to be the bearers of their own winnings in Nature's lottery, or of that which they had purchased as a speculation.

Lance had been working for nearly a week after making this purchase, at his claim, which, strangely enough, was the only payable one for some distance on either side. He had heard nothing further of Trevenna. Coke appeared to have left his usual haunts tem-

porarily. Once more a feeling of comparative security came over him. The apparently peaceful and isolated nature of the locality assisted to lull his grief-worn spirit into a condition of repose.

. . . . .

It was noon at the Tinpot Reef. He had been working hard since early morning, and had just decided to prepare his mid-day meal. The fire was kindled, the camp-kettle placed upon it, and the water for the tea, that indispensable adjunct of the Australian's *al fresco* refection, was commencing to boil. In anticipation of this stage of proceedings, Lance had seated himself upon a fallen tree and was smoking meditatively, after the manner of his class.

It was a lonely and silent spot—on this particular occasion rendered more solitary and deserted-looking than ordinarily, from the fact that the discouraged holders of the adjoining claims had arranged to prospect a distant gully, and had, to that end, departed in a

body on the previous morning. The ropes were still upon the windlasses, the raw-hide buckets on the braces. The tents and huts, with their rude adjuncts, showed that the desertion was but temporary; therefore, the camp could not legally be appropriated as 'worked and abandoned ground.' Still there was an eerie, and it might have been thought by a supersensitive resident an ill-omened, aspect about the place.

The morning had been fair, but though no clouds obscured the sky a chill wind had arisen, and the temperature seemed to fall as the rising blast became shrill-voiced and wailing.

Listening half mechanically to the boding signs of storm, Lance did not notice the clatter of hoofs as a woman came at speed along the ravine which lay to the eastward, and reined up her horse within a few yards of his camp.

He turned listlessly towards her, but started to his feet and gazed into the face

of the rider with the look, half intent, half horror-stricken, as of one who views an apparition.

'Kate Lawless!' he exclaimed.

'I used to be once,' the woman made answer, in a voice which seemed struggling with an attempt at cheerfulness overlain with habitual melancholy. Won't you lift me down, or have you forgotten the way?'

He was at her side in a moment, and as, with the accustomed aid, she sprang lightly to the earth, each gazed into the other's face for an instant without speaking.

'Hang the mare up to that dead tree,' she said. 'I've ridden her hard and far to-day, but she'll have to carry me across the mountain to-night; I mustn't chance letting her go. And now I suppose you're wondering what brought me here? I've got something to say to you, Lance Trevanion, that's well worth the hearing.'

'And what may that be?' he made answer coldly. 'Let me remind you that the last

words I heard you speak caused my ruin, body and soul.'

'For God's sake, don't talk to me like that,' she said. 'I'm the most miserable woman this day that walks the earth. I've helped to ruin you, I know, but how I've suffered for it! I'm risking my life in coming here to-day, and except to warn you for your good I wouldn't have done it. Look at me, Lance, and see if I'm speaking true or false!'

'You took a false oath once,' he said slowly; 'why should I trust you now, Kate?'

But while he spoke he could not avoid marking the unmistakable traces which misery had imprinted upon her face and form. His voice softened, his heart relented in spite of his just scorn and indignation. How changed was she indeed! And could that haggard woman, who, with streaming eyes and sorrow-laden features, stood before him in a suppliant attitude, be the Kate Lawless of old days?

The trim and lissom girl, with an air of wild unconscious grace, lithe of form and dis-

playing in her every movement the instinctive charm of early womanhood, had disappeared for ever. In her place stood a hard-faced woman—bitter, reckless, and despairing. Her dress, that unfailing test of feeling, showed that she had ceased to concern herself about her personal appearance. Her fair hair was carelessly twisted into a large knot, which showed behind the old felt hat which she wore: a shabby kirtle was secured with a belt around her waist above a torn and faded gray tweed riding-skirt. A red silk handkerchief knotted loosely round her neck furnished the only coquettish-looking bit of colour that her dress afforded, and, in spite of the carelessness and disorder of her apparel, formed an effective contrast to her dark gray eyes, still bright, and her abundant hair.

'You are changed, indeed, Kate,' he said musingly. 'So am I. Don't you think, by the way, I ought to call you Mrs. Trevenna?'

'Call me Kate this time,' she said; 'God knows whether we shall ever meet again. Do

I look miserable, neglected, downtrodden to the very ground? For that's what I am, besides being the wife of the greatest brute, the meanest villain, ever God made. But it serves me right, Lance Trevanion; it serves me well right!'

Here the wretched woman burst into a fit of passionate weeping. Hiding her face in her hands, she sat down upon the log, and in broken sentences detailed her wrongs and described the cruelty with which she was habitually treated. Why did she marry him? Well, she hardly knew. She was restless and miserable after the trial. Ned was gone, and she was half mad, and could have drowned herself when all was over. Once in Trevenna's power, the brute had shown her that one of his reasons for making her his wife was to wreak his spite upon her as a former favourite of his enemy; to punish her by every ingenious device of callous cruelty for having preferred Trevanion to himself. She had been worked upon before the trial by the artfulness of

Dayrell and Trevenna, the former having caused a letter to be written, as if from Lance to his cousin, sneering at her low birth and bush manners in a way which led her to believe that he had from the first intended to impose upon her ignorance. Hasty, credulous, and madly ungovernable in her fits of ill-temper, she had been practised on to bear false witness at the trial. Then Tessie, ignorant of the wonderful likeness of the two men to each other, had really mistaken Trevenna for Lance, having come upon him unexpectedly in one of his trips to Eumeralla.

'And this is what I've brought you to,' she continued, gazing at his rude attire, his changed aspect; for *never* does the look of freedom and careless pride return to the man who has known the prison garb, the clanking chain,—who has once answered mechanically to the harsh summons of the gaol warder. 'A working digger, and worse. Oh, my God! An escaped prisoner. God forgive me! I don't see as *you* can. No man

could that has gone through what you have!'

And here the frantic woman cast herself at his feet and bowed her head to the earth in an attitude of despairing supplication almost Oriental in intense self-abasement.

In spite of his cruel wrongs, of the life-wreck and dishonour in which this woman had been chiefly instrumental, Lance Trevanion's heart was touched as he saw the once haughty and tameless Kate prone in the dust at his feet.

He raised her gently, and, seating her beside him, essayed to comfort her. 'Kate,' he said, taking her hand, 'we are two miserable wretches, destined to be each other's ruin. Why should all the blame fall upon you? Fate was too strong for us. It is over now. We must bear it as we may. If I have undergone the torments of the damned, your deadliest enemy could not have chosen a worse lot than you have made for yourself. I forgive you freely.

Now you have far to go, and I must finish my shift by sundown. Let us make believe we are at the camp at Ballarat again; my dinner is nearly ready.'

A faint flicker, dying out instantly into rayless gloom, was visible in the woman's sad eyes. She dried her tears, and with a strong effort recovered her self-possession.

'You are too good to me, Lance; God bless you for it,' she murmured. 'I shall thank you to my dying day, whenever that is. I somehow think it mayn't be long. Anyway, I *will* have a few mouthfuls. There's thirty miles of mountain road to go back, and I must be home before *he* comes. I see you're marked,' she continued, looking with curiously blended sympathy and shyness at his discoloured face, 'but you're nothing like as bad hurt as *he* was, or you couldn't move about or stoop to blow up that fire. He was close upon dead for a week after he got back. He didn't tell me who done it till one day we quarrelled when he was better. Then he half killed me,—kicked and trampled

on me, as he's done many a time. If it wasn't for—for the child,'—here she hesitated and looked down,—'I'd have left him long ago.'

'Cowardly brute, ruffianly dog!' groaned Lance, grinding his teeth, 'why didn't I kill him when we met at Gibbo? I had two minds to finish him there and then. Things could hardly be worse than they are. But the next time we meet one of us dies; I swear it, as God hears me.'

'Oh! don't talk like that,' she cried, and even in his wrath Lance recognised with amazement the new element of pitying tenderness which anxiety for his safety evoked (oh! wondrous-fashioned instrument, the woman's heart! soaring to seraphic melody, yet at times clanging with frenzied discords, echoes from the Inferno); 'if there's anything of that sort you'll be sure to be taken, then it will be "life" or worse. But,' changing her tone to one of grave entreaty, 'what I came for to-day was this,—I knew you were here, no matter how;

where I live we know a lot, all the worse for us and other people.'

'And what was it, Kate?'

'*I came to warn you*,' she said, as she fixed her eyes imploringly upon his countenance, 'and you believe me, just as if Tessie was talking to you this minute.'

'To take care of my horse, Kate?' he said, half jestingly; 'I haven't any to lose.'

'To take care of your LIFE!' she cried, almost with a scream. 'You have that to lose, haven't you? and unless you are carefuller than I ever knew you to be, you'll find it out too late. I overheard him and that old wretch Caleb Coke (and of all the murdering dogs I ever heard of I think he's the worst) talking over some plan they've put up, and from words I caught I made out it was about you. There was a deal about gold-buying and some hut, and a box with nuggets and things locked up in it—money as well. You'll know if that fits. The man, whoever it was, was to be "put

away," as Coke said. So you take my tip! *Trust nobody about this field*, Caleb Coke above all, and get shut of Omeo the first minute you can.'

'When did you hear this?'

'The day before yesterday. They sat up late drinking, and Coke took more than he does in general; he's that full of villainy of all sorts, — robberies and murders too, people say,—that he's afraid of grog for fear of giving himself away. Anyhow, they both went off early this morning, and Trevenna's to be back to-night. So I ran up this little mare—she's the only one I've got now to my name — as soon as they were well off the place, and rode here on the chance of finding you at this reef.'

'Well, Kate, my poor girl, you've done me a good turn, if you never do another. You may have saved my life, you see. Not that it's worth much. But I've a notion of getting away to California or the Islands next month, and if I carry that out what you want me

to be careful about may rise in value, do you see?'

'Oh, don't joke in that horrid way; you never used to,' said the woman, rising and gathering up her skirt, as if in preparation to depart. 'It makes my heart ache'—here she pressed her hand to her breast; 'I have one, though you mightn't think it. But oh, for my sake, for every one's sake, for the sake of that girl in England, if you want to see her again, be careful! Don't go out of sight of Omeo—if you value your life—till you start for Melbourne, and then travel in company. Coke thinks no more of a man's life than a wild dingo's, and Trevenna's as bad. The things I've heard, I wonder God lets them live. I must go now. I've stayed too long. Remember my words; they're as true as if I was on my dying-bed.'

Then she walked rapidly to where her horse stood patiently—a small roan mare, the fineness of whose limbs, together with the character of head and eye, denoted Arab blood, crossed

probably with the wild 'mustang' of the hills. Trevanion kept by her side, wondering when the strange scene would end.

She made again as if to depart, for an instant touching the mare's bridle. Then, turning towards him, held out her hand —'Good-bye, Lance, and God bless you, wherever you are. You are sure you forgive me, don't you?'

'As I hope to be forgiven,' he said solemnly, unconsciously using a half-forgotten form of words, the true meaning of which had long been alien to his heart. 'That is, you poor ill-treated Kate, I forgive you freely, and with all my heart.'

As he spoke, the woman turned upon him a countenance so transfigured by gratitude and tenderness that Lance Trevanion, for the moment, hardly recognised her, so wonderfully softened, so refined and ennobled, was every lineament by the unwonted emotions. Deep and bright in her lifted eyes shone the fires of a buried passion as she gazed for a moment

into those of her companion. Then, as if inspired with sudden frenzy, she threw her arms around him, and, pressing his head to her bosom, kissed him passionately on the lips and forehead.

Disengaging herself as suddenly, she waved him back from approaching her, and, springing into the saddle, drove the astonished mare wild, plunging over the crown of the ridge and adown the rocky side of the ravine, which the roused and surefooted animal cleared with leaps like the 'flying doe' of her native woods.

'Poor Kate!' he exclaimed, as he slowly retraced his steps, and, gathering up his mining tools mechanically, proceeded to complete his day's work; 'there is good about her after all. How queerly men and women are compounded in this mad world—as I begin to think it is. What a life hers must be, tied to a scoundrel like Trevenna! and yet *he* is a free man—whose whole life, since he came to the colony, has been criminal—while I, who, God knows, never had a thought of wrongdoing,

have worn the felon's chain, and may again, who can tell? "A mad world, my masters!" in truth and saddest earnest.'

No doubt remained in Trevanion's mind, as in the seclusion of his hut that evening he pondered this singular interview, but that the woman had warned him in all good faith. If her words were not true, she was indeed the falsest of her sex. But there are looks, tones, gestures which neither man nor woman can feign; moments in which all the truth of the being comes to the surface; portions of our lives when a clearer insight is gained in the passing of seconds than can be derived from years of ordinary experience.

Such a flash of enlightenment was this, as when the lightning gleam pierces the gloom of midnight, showing the perils of the road, disclosing pitfalls and precipices previously shrouded in darkness. His course had been thus illumined. How heedless was he, pursuing what appeared to be a fairly open pathway; and yet, what unsuspected dangers

lurked on every side. These two remorseless villains, attracted by the report of his comparative opulence,—of course the gold-buying would reach all ears,—were evidently planning his robbery and murder. If not his own, whose then could it be?

There was another man whom it possibly concerned—Con Gray, well known as a gold-buyer in Omeo. He had lately made heavy purchases—had even stated that this was his last trip to Melbourne. This man was perhaps the fated victim. Under any circumstances Omeo was no longer safe harbour. He would sell his claim on the reef. He would invest his cash in gold, and, making some excuse, join the escort, and so get to Melbourne unsuspected, and safe from being robbed on the road—if a man could be said to be safe at any point of the journey between these savage solitudes and the metropolis.

. . . . .

Thus having fully resolved to quit Omeo, taking whatever risks might be involved in

that step rather than await the perils which seemed to be thickening around him, a feeling of impatience now took possession of Lance Trevanion. On the very day on which he had met Kate, he had 'broken down' some stone of extraordinary richness, which, though it might prove to be only a 'shoot,' in mining parlance, served to cause the value of the claim to rise measurably. He had therefore no difficulty in disposing of it to very great advantage, giving as his reason for quitting so promising a 'show' that he had decided on devoting himself to gold-buying for the future.

Meanwhile, the vision of final escape from a life of dread and suspicion, from the rude surroundings and mean shifts by which alone he could hope to secure safety under present circumstances, commenced to arise clear and inspiriting before him. It seemed comparatively easy to slip down to town under cover of having gold to dispose of—as did many a miner of the period. And then—and

then, once on blue water with a draft for five thousand pounds in his pocket, and more to follow at regular intervals as long as Number Six continued 'payable,' what a vista of change, affluence, almost happiness, opened out before him! This was Saturday; on this day week the monthly gold escort would leave Omeo for Melbourne. It gave him ample time to make needful preparations. It was the last day of the month. It might be the last day of his exile.

. . . . .

The week passed in an uneventful fashion. It seemed to Lance Trevanion as if all things were working harmoniously for his release from the thraldom he had so long endured. The claim had been well sold. He had received the proceeds in cash, as indeed is the custom of goldfields. He had made several advantageous purchases of gold, and had received advices from the mercantile house in Melbourne with whom, through Barker & Co., the storekeepers, he had established business relations,

that they would be prepared to honour his drafts or furnish him with bills of exchange in Britain or America. All things seemed prosperously working together for a noiseless and unsuspected exit from Omeo—from Melbourne—from Australia. He had reduced his worldly possessions to the smallest portable quantity, while leaving his hut and belongings in apparently the state which they would present during his absence, presuming merely a temporary absence.

So steadily had he laboured, so assiduously had he devoted himself to the arrangement of every detail which by any chance could be needed, that on the Thursday evening he was in the somewhat nervous position of a man who had nothing to do but to await the signal for departure. At the same time, he had neglected no precautions which could tend to throw his comrades of Omeo and the public generally off their guard. He had not signified his intention of starting with the escort. He had made the same arrangements which would have been

necessary for the consignment of his gold if he himself was absent.

He had said casually to his friend Barker, the storekeeper, that 'he might go, or he might not; he was not sure; just as the fit might take him. Anyhow, he would only be away a fortnight. It depended upon any fresh "show" turning up. There was a talk of something towards the Snowy River.'

He had purposely, from the day of his arrival at Omeo, adopted a rough, laconic manner, in keeping with his assumed character of 'Ballarat Harry'; had been, indeed, at some pains to efface tokens of gentle blood, of culture, of refinement, of that chiefly indefinable personal accompaniment which is usually described as 'the manners of a gentleman.'

This curious possession, sometimes laboriously acquired, and yet only perfect when merely derived from the accident of birth and inheritance, is, by some shrewd observers of human nature, believed to be wholly inseparable from the individual who has once

possessed it. Others believe — granting a careless habit of association, a looseness of fibre, recklessness of mood, sordid surroundings, not to mention a fixed intention of cutting loose from all the influences of early training — that wondrous, almost incredible declension may take place. One likes to fancy that the refinement produced by years of early training, joined with hereditary tendency, can never be obliterated. But

> 'Want can quench the eyes' bright grace,
> Hard toil can roughen form and face.'

Although, in the case of Lance Trevanion it would have been an exaggeration to have said with the poet—

> 'Poor wretch! The mother that him bare,
> In his wan cheek and sunburnt hair
> She had not known her child.'

But (and I who write have many a time witnessed the transformation) it is by no means so easy to recognise the 'lapsed gentleman' after he has, for whim, indolence, or necessity, played the bush labourer for a year

or two. The roughened hands, the altered expression of face, the gradual disappearance of *les nuances*, the minor society tricks of expression and manner, the rough habiliments, the changed step—all these and more—the inevitable concomitants of the comparatively rude life of the miner, the 'sundowner,' the shepherd or boundary-rider—denote the disrated aristocrat. Any one of the subdivisions of Australian manual labour *does* inevitably, indisputably, change and disguise the individual, of whatever previous history. There are exceptions, doubtless; but such are rare.

In addition to the safeguards which a miner's garb, daily labour, and rude association provided against recognition, Lance had practised of set purpose the slang phrases and ungrammatical idioms common among men of his adopted occupation. This kind of verbal deterioration is more easy to acquire by careless habit than to relinquish when an upper stratum of society is again reached, as relatives of young men returning from 'back

block' sojourns or 'northern territory' explorations have discovered to their regret. Taking his privations into consideration, it must not be considered very wonderful that the 'Ballarat Harry' of Omeo was a different-appearing personage from the Lance Trevanion of No. 6, Growlers', much more the haughty, rebellious heir of Wychwood.

The expected morning broke — a transcendent day of early spring, known even to this mountain land, mist-shrouded and storm-swept though it be in its winter garb. The sky was cloudless, the air breezeless, as the sun uplifted his golden shield over the forest-clothed shoulders of the Bogong and the Buffalo.

As the pearl-gray tints of the dawn-light insensibly dissolved,—losing themselves, even as had the darker hues of the earlier morning, in a bath of delicatest pink, enriched ere the eye could trace the translucence with hues prodigal of crimson and burnished gold,—the austere marble-white snow-peaks appeared to

stand forth in yet more awful and supernal splendour. Contrasted with colouring of indescribable brilliancy, they appeared a company of phantasmal apparitions in the silence of that wondrous dawn pageant.

Lance Trevanion was but a man as other men. How many times had he looked upon these and kindred wonder-signs of Nature with incurious eyes, holding them to be but ordinary phenomena with which, in the grip and peril of Circumstance, he had nought to do. But now, his nervous system being more tense, and his mental tone exalted in view of an imminent deliverance, a stir took place among faculties long disused. In curious unexplained fashion the beatific vision connected itself with his cousin Estelle, whom he had ceased to regard as a terrestrial entity. Severed from her, not less by seas and oceans than by inexorable fate, her image, bright and celestial as it had formerly appeared, was now fading rapidly ; becoming fainter and yet more ethereal with each succeeding recollection.

But on this, the last morn which he hoped to spend in this wilderness, her image seemed to present itself with strangely persistent clearness before him. How she would have joyed,—she that was so passionately fond of landscape scenery, who discovered fresh beauties in every humble hillock and lowly streamlet, — could but she have stood here with him; together could they have beheld this entrancing vision. With quickened tide, the back-borne stream of memory brought to his recollection the many times they had stood hand in hand and gazed at sunset, stream, or woodland, glorified by Nature's alchemy. He could almost fancy that he heard her voice, soft and low, rich, yet so clear and distinct, as she dwelt upon each feature of the landscape with instructed enthusiasm. He recalled her dainty ways — her unvarying softness and sweetness, her unfailing tact and temper, which had so often turned the tide of the squire's wrath, the discreet counsel that had so often been displayed in times of perplexity.

And now, what torture to think of her! of all the sweetness and beauty, divine as it now appeared to him, lost for ever, as much alien to him, henceforth and for evermore, as though she had been born on another planet!

The sudden change from the currents of his thoughts led the lonely, half-despairing man to an almost complete temporary detachment from his surroundings. He forgot much of the misery, the despair, the evil hap of this past year—that year which had been so much more eventful than the whole of his previous life. A new hope appeared to arise within his outworn, wearied heart. Might he not, if he regained the old land—might he not yet recover his position? Great heavens! was it then possible that such an elysium should be in store for him? He knew Estelle's steadfast fearless nature; he knew the sweet and loving pardon that would shine in her eyes when they met, if ever permitted by a merciful God. Was there a God? and could He be

thus merciful even to a forlorn, degraded outcast like himself?

As he stood leaning, with folded arms and meditative air, against the door-post of his humble dwelling, the clatter of hoofs along the track which led near the hillock upon which the hut stood gave a fresh current to his thoughts, and recalled him to a sense of the present. 'One day more,' he said, half aloud. 'Shall I ever see these hills and valleys again? I owe them much. They have proved good harbour for the stricken deer.'

'Who the deuce is this?' His thought shaped itself into speech as a wild-looking rider forced his horse, a half-broken colt, as near to the hut door as he could get him. The colt snorted and trembled, after the manner of his kind, but refused to budge a foot nearer. The horseman,—a long-haired, long-legged native lad,—exercising his spurs vigorously, besides devoting the colt and all his relatives to the infernal deities, was fain

to hold out a scrap of paper in his hand and await Lance's approach.

'It was you as sold Number One South, on the Tinpot Reef, to Yorkey Dickson, wasn't it?' inquired the ingenuous youth, staring at Lance.

'Yes; what then?'

'Well, there's been a bloomin' row between him and his mates and Mick Doolan's crowd. They're measuring him off, and makes out as you'd took up too much ground. He wants you to come. He give me this for ye; blank ye, I'll knock the blank head off ye, if ye don't stand quiet.'

This last communication, though in strict continuation with his previous address, was apparently intended for the colt's progressive education, that vivacious animal having taken fright at Lance's approach, and swerved backward with rear and plunge directly Lance reached out his hand for the missive. He, however, retained hold of the paper, which, after some difficulty, he deciphered—

'MR. HARRY JOHNSON.

'Dear Sir,—I paid you honest for Number One South, which I stand a good show of loosin' if you don't come out and prove your pegs. The Tips are trying the bluff game, and if you don't stand by me I'll be regular jumped and run off the field. Come afore dinner.

'Yours trewly,

'YORKEY DICKSON.'

'My word! I'll have him steady enough by the time we get back to Tin Pot. Been backed first time the day afore yesterday, and of course he's touchy,' he explained, as the colt, after a wild rear, in which he nearly fell backwards, stood with his forefeet rooted to the ground and snorted, trumpet-like. 'Shall I say you're a-comin'?'

'I suppose so—yes,' slowly answered Trevanion, half absently. 'Curse the claim and all belonging to it! I never wanted to see it again. But I won't have the fellow done out

of it. Tell him I've half a mind not to come, as I'm going to Melbourne to-morrow. It's lucky for him I got word to-day.'

'All right! I'll tell him you'll be there by dinner-time. So 'long!' and with the words on his lips he turned his horse's head, and with spur and shout forced him into a hand-gallop along the main track to the township, up the principal street, and opposite the hotel door before the half-tamed excited animal had time to halt or resist.

'It's an infernal nuisance,' said Trevanion, half aloud. 'But I don't want to leave things tangled up. Yorkey paid me good money, and I shouldn't like the poor devil to be wronged by those scoundrels. I'll walk, too; it will do me good, and keep me from thinking.'

The day promised to be glorious. Slowly the mountain mist had rolled back, and gradually disclosed the tones and magically blended colour effects which the awakened morn revealed. A dull grayish green tinted

the undulating prairies, stretching to the darkly dense forest which clothed the foothills of the Australian Alps. The sombre mountains gradually ripened in colour as the sun-rays pierced them in concentric lines, so that a graduated scale, shading from darkest green to brilliant emerald, developed hourly. Deathlike, still eternal-seeming, majestic, their snow-crowns rested on Bogong and Buffalo, with far-seen Kosciusko and Feathertop in the azure distance.

The solar heat became distinctly noticeable—indeed, bordering on oppressive. But Lance, excited in spite of himself, stepped joyously forward as he felt the miles slipping behind him, as though on some long-remembered schoolboy truant expedition. How different was the free elastic stride with which he covered the ground now from the aimless, dejected shuffle of himself and his fellow galley-slaves of the *President*! His spirits rose with each mile of the way traversed. Surely everything was turning in his

favour. He would be pardoned yet, his fair fame re-established. His innocence would not be so hard to prove, after all. Tessie and Kate could *now* give different evidence.

'Yes! England, Estelle, Wychwood! Fate would repent her of this dire injustice. He would yet again place foot on the shore of his native land, the home of his ancestors, as surely as he would presently ascend the ridge on the other side of this Mountain Ash Gully, into which he was now descending; as surely as he would behold the plain far-stretching towards the horizon, the diggers' tents in the secluded valley.'

Thus thinking, and moving forward with eager, quickened step, he reached the bottom of the ravine, which — a notable exception to the general distribution of timber — was covered with a scrub or thicket of the mountain ash saplings for some distance back. From the course of the little stream, eastward, appeared a narrow flat, riddled with shafts long worked and abandoned, but still

furnishing, in this depth and closeness, a record of former richness.

'What would Kate say if she saw me here to-day?' he thought to himself. And then her warning rang in his ears. 'As you value your life,' he seemed to hear. 'When I get back,' he said, 'I will swear to take excellent care of myself.'

'If such a thing as prudence can be knocked into a Trevanion, surely what I have undergone should produce it. But what a lunatic! what a benighted idiot I was to leave England at all! Why couldn't I have borne the old man's petulance, like scores of other fellows that I have known? All would have come right in the end, with Estelle's help. What a girl she was! And what a fool I have been! Looking back, it seems incredible that I—that *any man*—could have been so mad, so blindly besotted! I wonder how the old squire is now? He and Estelle must have a lonely time enough of it in the gloomy old manor-house. Well, I swear—as God hears

me now—that when I return—if I ever do—I will humble myself before the old man, and, yes, try for the rest of my life to make amends to him and to her for the sorrow and anxiety which I have cost them.'

As this last thought passed through his mind, shaping itself unconsciously into articulate speech, he stopped, with his right foot raised upon a block of stone, and listened intently, with head half turned towards the thickest portion of the scrub, which here approached the narrow track worn in old days by the cattle-herds of the surrounding pastures.

At that moment a shot was heard, and Lance Trevanion fell forward on his face, temporarily disabled, if not mortally wounded. Following the report, two men emerged from the covert, one of whom carried a gun. They were Caleb Coke and Lawrence Trevenna.

'That dropped him,' said the former, with a fiendish chuckle. 'Not far from the "curl," I'd say, if it was a bullock. Many a one the

old single barrel has finished. I thought she'd carry straight that distance.'

Here the wounded man moved his arm and groaned.

'Ha! my fine gentleman!' said Trevenna, 'I swore I'd have ye under my feet yet. Where are ye now?' And here the hellish villain spurned the unresisting form of his prostrate foe. What do ye say about "time" now? This is the last round of all.'

'That's no good,' growled Coke, 'and d—d cowardly, into the bargain. You couldn't stand up to him when he was right, so ye may leave him alone now. He's only stunned; the ball's grazed his forehead. Lend us that tomahawk o' yourn. I'll finish him.'

Two crashing blows, one of which clove the skull even to the brain, and this man—this 'masterpiece of nature,' so lately in full possession of the strength and beauty of youth—lay a disfigured corpse.

'Now lend a hand and let's get him off the road a bit,' said Coke, as coolly as if he was

directing the assistants of a slaughter-yard. 'Scrape some sand over that blood; there ain't much, but it might show. We've got to strip him first, and then it won't take long to drop him where he won't be seen again in a hurry.'

Dragged through the scrub some twenty yards or more, the dead man lay with dreadful widely open eyes as they had placed him. A heartrending spectacle surely, had but the men who now busied themselves in stripping the corpse possessed the feelings of ordinary humanity. But a lifetime of crime, for the most part undetected, had dulled the heart and brain of the older ruffian, to the exclusion of all but the baser instincts — a veritable demon disguised in form of man. Fiends of the pit could scarce have exceeded him in remorseless cruelty.

In Trevenna's case the love of gain, the hope of booty, together with complicated feelings of jealousy and revenge, rendered him callous to all natural feeling. Swiftly was

the dead man divested of his clothing; his watch, a few bank notes, which he had perhaps placed in his purse in readiness for the morrow, were secured, and after counting and inspection, taken possession of by Trevenna.

This done, the old man pointed to a mound a few yards distant around which the saplings clustered thickly, showing that some time had elapsed since the shaft which it marked had been commenced.

'That's the deepest shaft on the flat; they was a-sinking for the blue "lead" and bottomed on rock. You take hold of him.'

A combined effort placed the dead man on the edge of the shaft, down which the old man peered with ghoulish glee, as if to gauge the depth. 'Hold on,' he said, as he dropped a stone. The men waited for some seconds, which seemed long, until a dull thud came up from the lower level, telling by its delay that the shaft was little under a hundred feet.

In another moment the unresisting form was drawn to the edge of the yawning black-

mouthed pit, which, so wondrous straight and narrow, had been driven deeply into the bowels of the earth. A push, a heave, and the once noble and beautiful form of him who was Lance Trevanion disappeared from the face of the earth, hidden from the light of the sun, from the ken of mortal man, for ever and for ever!

. . . . .

As the strange dull sound, so unlike any other, which follows the fall of a human body down a deep shaft came up from below, Trevenna shuddered in spite of his hardihood.

The old man laughed aloud. 'You're only half baked yet, Larry, with all your blowing. When you've seen as many coves rubbed out as I have, you'll have better narves. We've got a ticklish game to play yet, mind ye, so don't go a-shivering and shaking like a school-girl. Take off yer duds now and collar his, and let's see how yer look.'

Trevenna, with a rude oath, repelled the accusation of softness, and doffing his own

garments, which he made into a bundle and threw down the shaft, proceeded to dress himself in the dead man's clothes. This transformation effected, the curious similarity between the two men became so apparent to the only spectator that Coke yelled with apparent amazement and danced around him with fiendish delight.

'By ——!' he cried, 'if that ain't the rummiest fake ever I see. Your own mother wouldn't know the difference. Hanged if *I* could tell, and I knowed the pair on ye purty well. Pitch a log or two down the hole; it won't be long afore it falls in. It's bad standing ground, and then he won't need no tombstone. We'd as well collar our horses now and get to the cove's hut after dark. Then you start fair to-morrow morning as "Ballarat Harry," alias Lance Trevanion, Esquire, and I'm d—d if there's a digger on Omeo as'll know the difference. What are ye lookin' in the grass for?'

'When we had the—the mill—I swear he

had a watch-chain. It must have dropped hereabouts.'

'Well, I'm blowed!' chuckled the older ruffian, 'if that ain't a good 'un. Takin' a man's life, his money, his duds, and his watch, and then growlin' because the chain's a-missin'. You'll find it in his hut, I'll go bail.'

## CHAPTER XXII

. . . . .

Lance Trevanion, dwelling and working by himself, had accustomed the miners around Omeo to his irregular, independent mode of life. Sometimes he was absent for days together, returning at midnight or dawn, as the case might be. When it was reported that he had been seen to enter his hut just after dark in company with another man, no one looked upon the circumstance as calling for comment. He had been at the claim which he had sold to Yorkey Dickson early in the day, and being detained there, discussing the intricacies of a mining dispute, had reached his home after sunset.

On the next morning—the one fixed for the departure of the escort for Melbourne—he

was heard inquiring from the Barker storekeeper if his gold had been properly labelled and directed. 'He was not sure about going himself,' he said, 'but thought it likely he might at the last minute.' The storekeeper looked at him with a certain air of surprise. 'What are you staring at?' he asked abruptly, at the same time fixing his eyes intently on the man.

'Oh, nothing, Harry,' Barker replied apologetically, 'only I thought there was something queer about you this morning. If you'd been a drinking man I'd have thought you'd had a booze on the quiet. And your face ain't got rid of them marks yet. Seemed they was about gone, last time I seen yer.'

'They'll not last much longer,' he said grimly, 'and the man that gave them to me got the worst of it. He won't be so ready for a row in future.'

'Is that so?' inquired the trader confidentially. 'We all thought it must have been his fault, you bein' such a quiet card in a general way. Serve him right, I say.'

'So I say too,' replied his auditor. 'By the way, just send your boy over to the post-office to see if there are any letters for me. I'll have a smoke while he runs over.'

In a few minutes the letters came. One from the banker in Melbourne acknowledging his last draft, and informing 'Mr. Henry Johnson' that they would receive and hold to his order the parcel of gold of which they had advices. The other, addressed to 'Mr. Henry Johnson, Long Creek, Omeo,' was in a female hand. Mr. Johnson placed it in his pocket unread, saying carelessly that it would do to read when he got home.

'He's a rum chap, that Ballarat Harry, as ever I see in Omeo,' said the storekeeper. 'Sometimes so jolly in a quiet way, and then he's as stiff and stand off as can be. But I'm dashed if ever I seen him as queer as he was to-day; why, I hardly knowed him when he came in first!'

When 'Harry Johnson' reached his hut, he sat down, and shutting the door, which he

carefully secured with a bolt, took out the letter and read as follows—a sardonic smile upon his features the while—

'TOORAK, 10*th September* 185–.

'MY OWN DARLING LANCE—Could you ever expect to receive a letter from me written in this country? In your wildest dreams, did it ever occur to you that I should come out to Australia in search of you? I told you at our last parting at dear old Wychwood that I would come, if you did not return within the time specified. I don't know that the time has quite elapsed, but when the poor old squire died (how changed and softened he was, Lance, in his latter days you can hardly think) I could not stay in England. You never wrote. We did not know what had become of you: whether you were dead or alive. I promised him, Lance, on his death-bed, that I would seek you out. And you know we Chaloners and Trevanions hold to our word.

'I *know now* all that you have done and

suffered, my poor darling—*all!* I can partly understand why you did not write. Still you should have done so; you know you should. I am not going to reproach you or to write a long letter. But fancy me having been up at Ballarat and stayed at Mrs. Delf's inn at "Growlers'," and know Jack Polwarth and his wife and dear little Tottie—who hasn't forgotten you—and Mr. Hastings and Mr. Stirling! I was actually there when your letter came from Omeo!

'Why didn't I write? You see *now* how hard it is to bear when friends are silent. But I refrained, sorely against the grain, *for your sake.* It might unsettle you, I thought, even tempt you to come to Melbourne, where the risk would be terrible. So I waited till I could get a really good opportunity and escort for Omeo. You will see me—I am almost beside myself with joy at the thought—almost as quickly as this letter reaches you, Mr. Vernon, my kind host, says. He bought me a delightful horse—so safe and pleasant. I

shall quite enjoy the ride up. A storekeeper, his wife and daughter, also an assistant, are my companions, so you see I am well protected. Have you got the ring and the token? I have mine safe. Ever and till we meet, your own ESTELLE.'

'Well, I'm blowed,' was the reader's inelegant but characteristic exclamation as he folded up the letter,—oh! rare and precious outpouring of a fond woman's love and tenderness,—'if this game isn't right into my hand! I've got his gold. I've got his cash. His girl's running fair into my arms, and, if the luck holds, I'll have his house and land in the old country. Lance Trevanion, if I haven't got square with you, the devil's in it, or Caleb Coke, which comes to the same thing! I've got to take care *he* don't turn dog on me, though. It was he put me on to plant for Trevanion in Mountain Ash Gully. We're both in it, though he fired the shot and knocked him on the head afterwards. We've

gone whacks so far in the nuggets and cash in the hut; who'd 'a thought he'd such a pile stowed away there? But if I can get to Melbourne, take the girl on the hop, marry her, and clear out to England or 'Frisco the day after, as I expect he intended to have done, old Caleb may whistle for his share. By Jove! what a lucky job it was that Coke and I had a good overhaul of the hut on the quiet. It's put me up to all I wanted to know to act Lance Trevanion to the life. I've done it before, but now I'm up in my part to the letter. I've got the very clothes he was last seen in, the marks on my face *he* gave me, damn him, much about the same as I gave *him*; with putting on a bit of a drawl that he always had, the devil himself wouldn't know us apart. I wonder if he will when *my* turn comes below?'

Then the villain laughed aloud, a ghastly sound in the lonely hut and still night. The unnatural sound died away,—guilt rarely laughs long,—when, lighting his pipe and

stirring the embers of the fire in the chimney, he recommenced his meditative plotting.

'Now then, the devil of it is, that I'll have deuced little time to work things in, if this girl Estella, or whatever she calls herself, comes up to-morrow or next day. However, perhaps the shorter the time the better the chance; she'll be bustled, and won't have time to think. All I've got to do is to play Lance Trevanion to the life for a day or two, get her off to Melbourne, and follow up after. The sooner I'm off the better, for fear Kate gets wind of it and blows the whole bloomin' plant to blazes. There's nothing she'd like better, blast her! I think I can do the swell business middling near the mark. I've been studying some of those squatter toffs that come to Monaro for store catch. If a bit of slang leaks out, or a slip in grammar, why, of course, it's from associating with rough cards at the diggings, not to mention the chain-gang business; she'll believe, like all these flats of new chums, that Australian life's

enough to take the shine out of any man's mind and manners, grammar, and good looks. Then the wedding! Ha! ha! if that won't be the best joke out. Fancy Larry Trevenna spliced to a real lady—a dashed handsome girl I believe she is—anyhow her likeness says so. Next day off to England or America, —the last if I can fix it—and no more Australia for yours truly.

'The best of it is, even if I *am* nabbed, I can easily prove that *I'm not him.* Then there's the bigamy racket, though I daresay if I let Kate off, she'd be glad enough to take her own way and clear out. It's a ticklish business, of course; but I stand to win or lose a heavy stake, and I'll play it out, by God! I don't see how she can doubt I'm the real man. I've read his letters and things till I nearly know all the places and people by heart. I've got the ring and the locket she talks about, and a lot of family trinkets and nicknacks, and there's no mistake we *are* as like—that is, were—as two peas. Why the

deuce we should be, the devil only knows. Well, I'll have another smoke and turn in. There's a deal to think about to-morrow.'

Next day being Sunday, which even at the wildest Australian digging differs somewhat from other days, Mr. Harry Johnson dressed himself more carefully than usual, and after breakfast went 'down town'—that is, he proceeded to Barker's store, in order to gather up news generally and discover whether Miss Chaloner was on the road up, so that he might be fully prepared for the momentous meeting.

As it happened, he found out precisely what he wanted. A young fellow had arrived that morning and had passed a party one stage back on the road answering to their description. The young man was not a miner, but a cattle-dealer, making a forced march to Monaro in order to buy store cattle. The price was rising daily, so he was riding post-haste for fear of losing the market. He had overtaken the storekeeper's party, in

which were three women—one a fine-looking girl—to this he could swear—and riding a clever, well-bred hackney: such a horse was never bought in Melbourne under a hundred pounds. He believed they would be in Omeo to-morrow evening before sundown, and were going to stay at the Reefers' Arms.

On Monday, therefore, Lawrence Trevenna devoted the whole of his energies to the fullest preparation for the leading part which he had to play. He neglected no precaution. He made fresh search among the papers of Lance Trevanion. He read and re-read the letters contained in the brass-bound portmanteau which had been sent to Omeo by Charles Stirling. He reckoned up over and over again the various points on which it was necessary for him to be accurately informed in order to satisfy any lurking doubt of Miss Chaloner.

He had noted more than one reference to the chain with a coin attached, and an almost historical heirloom which he had given her at

parting. The ring which Lance always wore, and which he had taken from the dead man's finger, was also alluded to. The half threat which Estelle had made to come to Australia, if Lance did not return, or write, was spoken of. Of course, as a passenger in the *Red Jacket*, he knew the day on which that vessel sailed, when she arrived in Melbourne, and those occurrences of the voyage which Lance had described in his home letters. The doubt in his mind was naturally whether this high-born damsel would throw herself into his arms with the unreserve of plighted love, and be ready to marry and depart with him from Australia at the earliest possible period; or whether she might have her doubts as to his being the right man, and so work confusion or even danger. Much was on the cards. All depended on the deal. But he held a strong hand, he told himself. Trumps, too, in profusion. And, with the hardihood of a born and practised gambler, he stood prepared to back his luck to the last.

The following day passed slowly; but as the evening wore on he lounged over to the hotel at which the travellers were to arrive, and made it carelessly but generally known that he expected a young lady who was coming up with Caldwell and his wife and sister. He was thereupon congratulated in a jocular manner, when finally, as the early spring day was fading fast into the short twilight, the tramp of horses' feet was heard along the well-worn track which came up from the coast town, and the little cavalcade, composed of two men and three women, halted before the hotel verandah.

The inn loungers gathered around the strangers, proffering aid, much stimulated by the prospect of news. The ladies had been assisted from their steeds, and the landlord was leading the way to the principal sitting-room, in which a cheerful fire was blazing, when a tall man came through the party, and, pausing before the young lady who followed at the rear of the party, said, in a

voice tremulous with emotion, 'Estelle, my darling, we meet at last!'

The girl gazed earnestly in his face for a moment, his eyes meanwhile fixed on hers with an intense and even increasingly fervid glance; then, as he wound his arm around her waist and drew her towards him, she murmured with undoubting faith—'Lance, ah! my dearest Harry, I hardly knew you at first. It must be your beard, I think. And how did you happen to be here to meet me?' she continued, disengaging herself from his embrace, as a sense of shyness and confusion commenced to assert itself as she looked around.

'And why did you not write and tell me you were in Australia before?' he said, half menacingly; 'it was hardly fair to me, I think.'

'It is a long story; we shall have plenty of time to talk it over. I did it for the best, though I daresay you will blame me. But I must go and rest a little; we are all terribly

tired. You will be here this evening, though I warn you we shall go to bed early.'

She did not appear at the ordinary evening meal, sending out word that she was fatigued, and had a quite too overpowering headache. The storekeeper's wife and daughter were loud in praise of the uncomplaining manner in which Miss Chaloner had undergone the hardships of the journey. 'It's not as if she was used to it, poor dear,' said the matron, 'like me and Bessie here, as has had to rough it all our lives, pretty near. Yet there she was, taking everything as it come, and never a growl out of her. My word! she can ride though.'

'And that horse of hers is a plum,' assented Miss Bessie; 'she looked after him well, and he's worth it. I'd like to have him, I know, instead of my old crock. I believe he's thoroughbred, or close up; and if they ever have races in this beastly hole, he'd win all the money they're game to put up, hands down.'

'Nonsense, Bessie,' replied the elder woman;

'how do you know? Your tongue goes too fast, Miss. Don't you think so, Mr. Johnson? I don't know what's come to the girls nowadays, they're that forward and think they know everything. But you're a lucky man, if it's true as you're engaged to be married to the young lady, as it seems is a fact. There's very few girls like her in this country or any other, you mark my words, and I hope you're good enough for her, that I do. I'll just go and see how she is.'

The worthy dame, on returning from the bedchamber, brought the intelligence that Miss Chaloner could not appear again, being prostrated by a nervous headache, but sent a message to Mr. Johnson that she would be quite well in the morning, and would be glad to see him after breakfast. With this ultimatum 'Mr. Johnson' was fain to be outwardly content, and, though inwardly chafing, betook himself to his hut, there to spend the night with what 'companions of Sintram' might be available. He was not, however,

wholly dissatisfied with the progress made. 'Anyhow,' he thought, as, after a couple of potent 'nips,' he sat smoking over his fire, 'the first act's over, and pretty right to. She believes I'm the man, and though something or other's startled her,—like a half-broken filly,—she'll come to, after a bit. I must have a regular good pitch to her to-morrow, and bring out the cove's rings, and trinkets, and keepsakes, that she knows about. I'll have the whole thing out with her, and settle about when we're to meet in Melbourne and get spliced. It's a job that won't stand waiting about. I must get her away and on the road in a day or two, and pick up the escort and get down by myself. If I leave with her, that infernal Kate'll get wind of it and be on our track as sure as a gun. She thinks I went to Monaro for horses, and won't be back for a month, but she'd fossich out any woman business if I was the other side of h—l, I do believe.'

'I shall be cornered,' he said to himself,

pursuing the same train of thought, 'if she wants to stay here a while and see where I was working, and all that rot that women are so dashed foolish about. I must lay it out that I might be taken any day, and the sooner we both get to Melbourne and off by the first ship—the day after we're married, if possible—the safer for her dearest Lance—that's me—*me!*'—here the villain laughed aloud with fiendish enjoyment of the base deceit of which the unhappy girl was to be the victim. 'If he could only see us! ha! ha! Once we're married, there's no get over that. Once we're clear away, hang it, I'd almost like to have him alive again, to enjoy the sight of his face and see how he took it. His lady-cousin—his wife as was to be, that wouldn't touch me with a pair of tongs—if she knew—*if* she only knew—that it was Larry Trevenna, that used to be a stable-boy, a farm-lad, a horse-dealer's tout. If mother hadn't died, things might have been better, and old granddad too. She used to talk as if

there was some mystery. I wonder if there was, and what sort. Anyhow there WILL be, and that's enough for the present, if it comes off.'

Estelle rose early next morning with a view to survey at leisure her novel surroundings. She had perfectly recovered from the fatigue of the previous day. The regular exercise of the bush journey had acted beneficially upon her health and spirits, as indeed such a term of travel does upon all normally constituted people. The night had been clear and frosty. As she paced the verandah, which, as in most houses of the class, absorbed the whole front of the hotel, she was first surprised, then charmed and excited, by the view of the majestic Alpine range, the snow-covered peaks of which were glittering in the rays of the morning sun.

'How grand! how inconceivably lovely!' said she, half aloud; as gradually the view opened out, in a sense expanded itself before her rapturous gaze. 'How little I expected

to feast my eyes upon a scene like this! Poor Lance, poor fellow! how often such a glorious landscape as this must have comforted him in his loneliness! Perhaps he thought of me at such times; he could not help it. He used to tease me at Wychwood, I remember, about what he called my craze for scenery. I must remind him of it to-day. Yes, to-day; how strangely it sounds! I shall have to make up my mind——' and here she seemed to fall into a musing mood, while a sigh from time to time escaped involuntarily. 'Yes,' she thought; 'it would be hardly advisable to live here after we—after we were married. Reports would be sure to get abroad, and then, perhaps, if he was recaptured his punishment would be increased, and that would kill him—would kill us both indeed. I could never survive it, I feel sure.

'Then, what would be the safer course to pursue? To go to some seaport, where they could take ship for Europe or America, as the case might be? Why should they not take

their passage for San Francisco? Once landed there, who was to know Lance from any other Australian digger, numbers of whom had been backward and forward since the earliest "rush," in 1849? Melbourne in some respects would be the better port of shipment; it was nearer, more easily reached, and there was such a mixed multitude of "pilgrims and strangers," miners, speculators, colonists, Europeans, and foreigners, that any number of persons "illegally at large" (an expression she had caught in Melbourne) might pass unnoticed.'

The clang of the breakfast-bell put an end to her meditation, and exchanging the keen air of the outer world for a seat near the glowing fire, high piled with logs, she took the place reserved for her near her travelling companions of the previous day. The social atmosphere of the *table d'hôte* was less 'select' than that at 'Growlers',' but the utmost decorum nevertheless prevailed. Among the strangers to her was a middle-aged man, whom

she heard addressed as Mr. Gray, and more familiarly as Con. He was a gold-buyer, about to leave for Melbourne on the following day.

'How many ounces are you taking down this time, Con?' asked a jocular miner at the other end of the table. 'You'll be waited for some day, if you don't look out.'

'Not much this time, old man,' said Gray. 'But you're right; it *is* a risky game, and I don't think I'll chance it much longer. Indeed this may be my last trip.'

'Right you are,' said the furnisher of the raw material. 'I'm blessed if I'd travel that road the way you fellows do, and known to have gold on you, for all the percentage you make out of it. There's too many cross chaps about, for my fancy, and so I tell you.'

'Well, a man must live, you know, Johnny,' replied the gold-buyer good-humouredly. 'But I think I'll take your advice and cut the road after this.'

When her lover arrived, Estelle, as was natural, bent an earnest gaze upon his form

and features. Neatly but plainly dressed, his stalwart figure, erect and stately, showed to great advantage among the carelessly attired loungers who thronged the entrance. His bold regard, his dark and clustering hair, his regular features, stamped him as a being of different mould, in her eyes, from the ordinary persons around them. A thickly growing beard and moustache hid the lower part of his face, and concealing much of his mouth and chin, somewhat altered (Estelle thought) the expression of his countenance. It was not wholly an improvement, though she could understand his reason for adopting the prevailing Australian fashion.

He passed carelessly into the parlour, where there were still a few people gathered around the fireplace. Putting his arm round her waist, he said jocularly, as he drew her towards him, 'So you have recovered from your fatigue. After our long separation, it seems awfully hard on me that we should see so little of each other.'

The storekeeper's wife smiled, and Miss Bessie giggled, as Estelle, blushing deeply, withdrew herself from his clasp, saying hurriedly, 'I don't think there's any necessity for being so affectionate in public. We have a great deal to talk over and decide to-day.'

It was a strange feeling that had come over her for the moment. Added to her natural dislike to such endearments before spectators of the class then present, a curious indefinable sensation of repulsion took possession of her temporarily, as strong as it was instinctive. He drew back, with a half-angry look; then, assuming an air of injured dignity, said, 'I ought to apologise. I forgot you hadn't been long out from home. We don't mind these trifles in Omeo. Do we, Mrs. Caldwell?'

'Not when people's engaged,' said the matron; while Miss Bessie tossed her head, and said, 'She thought all the gentlemen wanted keeping in their places; she'd let them know when she'd a young man of her own, that she would.'

All this was of course painful to Estelle; but fearing, from his changed expression, that she had hurt his feelings, she proceeded to make amends, after the manner of her sex, by hastily proffering concessions. The sudden thought of his melancholy life, of his wrongs and misfortunes, almost impelled her to beg his pardon in the humblest manner for the involuntary slight. Yet the thought *would* obtrude itself of how differently Mr. Stirling or Mr. Dalton would have acted under the same circumstances, and a sigh told how grieved she felt that any environment, how sad and mournful soever, should have obscured the refinement so inherent in the blood of Trevanion.

Prompt to redress the fancied injury, she placed her hand within his arm, saying, 'I think the best thing we can do is to go for a nice long walk on this lovely day, and you shall show me a little of the "field,"—you see I understand diggers now,—and your hut, where you have been living

all this time by yourself, you poor lonely hermit that you were.'

'Now that's the way to behave,' said Mrs. Caldwell, smiling, with motherly approval; 'I see you'll know all you've got to do after a while—girls is flighty at first, Mr. Johnson.'

So they walked forth along the principal (and only) street of Omeo, not wholly without observation from the miscellaneous crowd of miners, teamsters, wayfarers, tradespeople, bushmen, and others, with which a mining town where gold is abundant—and such was then the stage at which Omeo had arrived—is filled up. More than one head was turned from time to time to gaze with interest and surprise at the distinguished-looking though plainly dressed girl 'who had come up to Ballarat Harry.'

'His luck's in, my word,' was the remark of a stalwart miner, who, pick on shoulder, was following a cart with his mate, conveying their worldly possessions. 'I wonder if they're

going to live in that hut of his on the ridge. She don't look as if she'd been used to cook in a slab fireplace, or lift the lid off a camp-oven.'

'Camp-oven be blowed,' rejoined his mate, who was affectionately carrying a long-handled shovel, as being too valuable an implement to be trusted in a vehicle, 'they're a-goin' to Melbourne to be spliced; and most like he'll settle there and take to gold-buying on a big scale. He's well in, is Harry, by all accounts.'

'It beats me what she sees in him, then—a gal like her, as might have any man in the whole bloomin' colony, in a manner of speaking. Harry was a jolly, free-handed chap, as you'd see when he first come, but he's got that surly and short lately as you'd hardly know him as the same man.'

'Well, I warn't here when he first come, but from the look of him, when I see him the other day, I shouldn't be surprised if there was something "cronk" about him, for all his gold-buying.'

All unheeding of this careless but not inaccurate criticism, the lovers sauntered on. As they cleared the outskirts of the town, Estelle said, 'Now you must show me your hut. I *must* see the place where you have lived your lonely life, poor fellow. How I used to pity you, when I thought of it.'

'There it is, on that rise—this track leads up to it. It's such a miserable hovel, I hardly like you to see it.'

'Nonsense! you forget I've been to Growlers' and Ballarat, and know all about diggings. Why, it's the regular thing, like a shooting-box or a bothy in the Highlands. Everybody does it. Better men than you (I was going to say) live in huts. Why, this is quite a grand hut! What fine broad slabs, and a big padlock too. I thought the miners were so honest?'

'Sometimes,' he said, 'not always.'

They walked into Ballarat Harry's hut. Estelle sat herself down on a three-legged stool by the side of the still smouldering

fire, and gazed into the pile of ashes on the hearth. Here, for so many a lonely evening, had he sat and smoked and thought —ah! with what bitterness—of a lost home, a forfeited birthright, of a father's curse, which, harmless as thistledown at first, had commenced to be so fatally prophetic. It *was* hard. Fate had been against him—against them from the beginning. But she would make up to him—as far as woman's love might repair the wrongs of destiny and the cruelty of man—for this dreadful episode of his life.

'Oh Lance—dear Lance!' she said; 'how you have lived through it all I can hardly imagine.'

'If I had not had the thoughts of you to keep me up,' he said, looking at her with eyes of bold admiration, 'I might have given in. But I kept always saying to myself, *she* will reward me, Stella will be mine when we meet, and all the past will be forgotten—and you *are* mine,' he said, as he took her hand in his

and made as if to exact the betrothed lover's accustomed tribute.

But again a shrinking feeling of denial—for which she could not account—possessed her whole frame. She drew back shuddering. 'Pray, don't let us have any nonsense of that kind,' she said; 'there will be plenty of time by and by. At present, I feel as if I had so much rather hear all about your trial and the cruel unjust sentence which ruined you, and of your life in those dreadful hulks; I always wonder how you managed to escape.'

For one moment the flash of his eyes in stern displeasure reminded her vividly of bygone days and their lovers' quarrels at Wychwood. Then he spoke, in a voice studiously free from irritation—

'I got out through the help and managing of Tessie Lawless—a girl that cared a deal more for me than you do, if that's the way you're going to treat me. You've forgotten our old Wychwood days, I suppose. Well, as you'll have to leave to-morrow, or next

day at furthest, for Melbourne, and we go different ways, we mustn't fall out, must we? I can wait. So we'd better talk over this journey.'

'Now don't be cross, my dear Lance; you must give me time. Remember, I've been a lonely and very sad woman for years, and all thoughts of love and marriage were put out of my head. Do tell me of your escape.'

'Well, I DID escape,—which is the chief thing that concerns us now,—or I believe I should have hanged myself, like the fellow that was in my cell before me—or got shot, like two other men, for trying to clear out by day. What I suffered, no tongue can tell!'—here he assumed the most tragic expression possible, and groaned as if at the recollection,—'the very thoughts of it make my blood boil.'

'But how did this girl—Tessie Lawless, was that her name?—succeed in releasing you?'

'Well, she persuaded a man who, I believe,

was pretty sweet after *her*, to come one dark night with a boat to the stern of the old hulk. She sent money and bribed my warder, so I was able to get out and drop down into the boat. After I was free, she sent a man and two horses to where I could meet them, and I came up here.'

'What a brave girl! I should like to see and thank her. She must have been a great friend of yours?'

'Well, I suppose she thought a good deal of me in her way, poor thing. I believe she's in Melbourne somewhere, but I've never seen her since.'

'You don't seem to have been very anxious to thank her for all the devotion and courage, I must say. It's the way of the world, I suppose, and Australia is very like other places in essentials, I begin to suspect. And now, what are our plans to be? It will be a risk for you to remain here longer, I suppose?'

'To be sure it will. You can't tell what

may happen. Any day I might be arrested. Our dart — our plan, I mean — is to get to Melbourne as soon as possible. You can go down with Holmes Dayton and Con Gray. A policeman goes with them as escort, and, I think, Gray's sister-in-law. You couldn't have a safer party. I shall go across country towards the Murray, and travel a way of my own. We can meet in Melbourne at any place you arrange, and be married at once— that is, the day before the vessel sails that we take our passage in for San Francisco. Then we're off as Mr. and Mrs. Johnson, and no one the wiser! What do you say to that?'

'I suppose,' she answered slowly and reflectively, 'that it would be the best plan.'

'The best plan!' he repeated, almost angrily, while a sudden flash shone from his eyes, and a frown of impatience crossed his face, which brought back old memories with magical suddenness. 'Why, of course it is. There can't be any other, unless I hang on

here till that infernal hound Dayrell track me down. But you don't seem to be half keen about it. Can it be'—and here he changed his voice and looked earnestly, almost pleadingly, into the girl's face—'that you have changed your mind? If you have, say so. I have lost home and friends—everything—I know. Am I to lose you too?'

His eyes rested on the girl with almost magnetic power. Then a blush came to her cheek, as she replied—

'You have my promise, Lance, and the word of a Chaloner is sacred. Surely you should know that? Of course I will do as you wish. But—and here she smiled and raised her eyes pleadingly—you must not be hasty, but bear with me a little. All things are so strange, and the time is short. After all my looking forward to our meeting, you have taken me a little by surprise.'

'Forgive me, my darling,' he said, with well-acted warmth; 'I *was* hasty, but you know the Trevanion temper—my pride was

touched. And you will be ready to start to-morrow? That horse of yours (old Vernon, or whatever his name was, is no bad judge, if he picked him) is as fit for the road as when he left Melbourne. I suppose he expected to get a commission out of you?'

'You must not talk in that way of my good old friend,' she said gravely. 'He was like a father to me; I can't be too grateful to him and his dear good wife. But I shall be quite ready to start in the morning with the people you mention. I am so glad there is a girl in the party.'

As they walked back to the inn, the arrangements for meeting in Melbourne were discussed in detail and completely sketched out. She was to go to Mr. Vernon's house, and thence, when apprised of his arrival, she would meet him at the South Yarra Church, only escorted by her friends. Mr. Vernon would 'give her away,' and she would ask them to keep the matter secret. The ceremony would be deferred till the day before

the sailing of their vessel for Honolulu or San Francisco, as might be decided. Unless Fate intervened with unexampled unkindness, it seemed as though a burst of sunshine was about to break through the cloud of misfortune which had so long encircled them.

'By this time to-morrow evening,' he said, 'you will be on your way to Melbourne. It's lucky you've had so much practice lately in riding. I suppose you found it rather awkward at first?'

'Awkward?' she said, gazing at him with astonishment, 'Why, you surely must have forgotten that I hunted regularly the season before you left home.'

'Oh yes; of course — of course,' he said. 'But I seem to have forgotten so many things,' —here he assumed an air as of one indistinctly recalling long-past incidents. 'Then the horses out here are so different.'

'I don't think that at all,' she answered; 'I have seen some wonderfully fine horses here. And I am sure my good old Wanderer,

that I rode up, is as grand a hackney as ever was saddled. You mustn't run down Australian horses, you know.'

'Never mind the horses,' he said pettishly; 'I wish *I'd* never seen one, out here at any rate; and now let us settle it all, how we're to meet, and all the rest of it. I'm to send a note to John Vernon and Company, Flinders Lane,—is that the address?—and you'll be ready at a day's notice, won't you?'

'Yes,' she said slowly and half absently; 'I suppose so.'

'You see it's this way,' he said, coming still nearer to her and looking into her face as if to read her inmost thoughts. 'I can't afford to hang about Melbourne. What I've got to do is to find out the first steamer, take our passages as Mr. and Mrs. Johnson, then get the license: there's a church close by the Vernons, isn't there, where all the swells go? —Toorak, or some such name. We slip over there before lunch, and next day we're man and wife and at sea—clear of Australia—free

and safe for ever! What a sell it will be for those bloodhounds of police!'

As he spoke rapidly, his eyes gleamed with unholy triumph, carefully schooled as was the general expression of his countenance. In spite of her deep abiding sympathy for his sorrows, the girl's gentle spirit recoiled from the savage satisfaction displayed in his closing words.

'Oh! Lance,' she said, 'do not speak like that. It pains me to hear even a tone of lightness about our deliverance. If God permits it, we should be thankful all our lives. But even if there has been pursuit, these men that you so hate have only been doing what they supposed to be their duty.'

'You are an angel,' he said, with an air of deepest conviction and tenderness, 'too good for me and for every one. For your sake, I suppose I must forgive these rascally traps, especially if they don't run me down. And now, as we shan't see each other in the morn-

ing, just one kiss before we part for the last time.'

But again she drew back; the same indefinable feeling of repulsion arose in her instinctively, as strong, as inexplicable. 'You have not long to wait now,' she said softly; 'until then, you must humour all my whims. You will, Lance, won't you?'

'I suppose so,' he said half sullenly; 'women are all alike, full of fancies. But I *did* think you would remember old days. You used not to be so stand off and distant.'

'We were girl and boy then,' she said. 'Everything seems so changed. I can hardly fancy even now that we are to be married in a fortnight, though I have come all this way to find you out. Some strange mysterious feeling stirs within me from time to time. I can hardly explain it. It is almost like a presentiment of evil.'

He laughed suddenly, and as suddenly stopped. '*I* am not changed,' he said, 'except by what I have gone through;' then

he dropped his voice into a mournful murmur, as he carelessly and apparently by chance touched the Chaloner ring. 'But if you can't make up your mind; if you would like to cry off, to leave me to my fate, say so in time. Perhaps it would be better for you after all.'

'No, Lance!' she said, and as she spoke she raised her eyes heavenward, moist with tears of tenderest sympathy, as the thought rushed across her brain of his lonely and desperate condition, abandoned by *her* as by all the world. 'We Chaloners keep faith. I am your plighted bride, and I am ready to fulfil my vow, my promise to the living and to the dead. But you must bear with a woman's weakness and consider how little time I have to prepare. What would they say at Wychwood, I wonder?'

'We're in Australia, Stella, and not in England—don't forget that,' he answered, the frown again darkening his countenance. 'I hope we shan't see the old country for

many a day. We must learn to forget old ways and fashions.'

'I can never do so, wherever we may wander,' she answered, with quiet emotion. 'I don't like to hear you speak of it as a thing of course, and I wish you would call me Estelle, Lance, not Stella. You never used to do so.'

'Very well, Es-telle,' he said, 'I won't do it again, if it bothers you. Stella's a common name out here; that's the reason, I suppose. And now, as we're at the hotel, we'd better say good-bye. I won't come in the morning. It's no use making people talk; they're ready enough, without helping them. You and that Miss Graham can get away with old Dayton to-morrow. It's the way everybody up here travels, and nothing's thought of it. I'll write the moment I get down. Most likely I'll be in Melbourne as soon as you.'

They parted with a simple hand-clasp, she gazing into his face as if to read the signs of a spirit worn and wearied with the worldly

injustice. His face was calm, and betrayed no emotion other than deep regret at the departure of a friend. He tried to throw into the parting words the sentiment which the occasion demanded, but it was patently an effort, and had not the ring of truth or tenderness.

'He *is* changed,' she told herself, as she moved forward across the verandah of the hotel and sought her bedroom. 'How changed, I could hardly have imagined. But who would not have been altered by the frightful experience he has gone through! I must try and make him happy, as some poor recompense for all his sorrows.'

Could she have noted the dark and evil expression of her companion's face, as he lit his pipe and strode savagely along the path to his solitary hut, heard the foul oaths with which from time to time he essayed to relieve his feelings, or the vows of vengeance upon her for her coldness, she would have deemed him changed indeed.

## CHAPTER XXIII

The morning of their departure rose bright and cloudless. The air was fresh and bracing, for the hoar-frost lay unthawed for hours on the wire-grass in the sheltered valleys, adown which the little cavalcade passed on the Gippsland road. The trooper, a young mounted constable of the Victorian Police, with the storekeeper, Holmes Dayton, rode in front. Then came Estelle Chaloner and her travelling companion, Janie Graham, a young girl born and nurtured in the bush, the niece of the gold-buyer Constantine Gray. She had been on a visit to Omeo (save the mark!), and was now returning to her friends. They had not gone far when Dayton, the storekeeper, turning into a forest track which ran at right

angles to the main road, explained that he had occasion to meet an acquaintance on business, and would rejoin them at the next stopping-place. The trooper then fell back to effect companionship with Gray, while the girls succeeded to the leading position.

Mounted on the good steed which she had learned to love, Estelle's spirits rose as she felt his free elastic motion. Rested by his sojourn in the inn stable, he paced fast and easily along the forest paths.

Though unable to account for the feeling, Estelle was conscious of a distinct sensation of relief, almost amounting to exhilaration. She was quitting Omeo for ever, and she looked forward with pleasurable anticipation to the few days of wayfaring which the journey to Melbourne would necessitate.

'It will be my last week of freedom,' she told herself. 'I shall have to sell you, though, my poor Wanderer, you dear, good, faithful creature!' and she patted her horse's arching neck and pushed over a stray lock of his mane.

'Well, wherever I go, and whenever I see the old land again, I shall never have a better horse. I have ridden some good ones in the old country, but I doubt if any one of the lot was as sure-footed, as easy, as untiring—certainly not on the food and treatment you have had to put up with. I wish I could take you home. Indeed, if we were going back in the ordinary fashion, I *would* take you with me, whatever it cost. It would be only buying you over again; and good horses are cheaper here, even at gold prices, than in England.

'Now let me see,' she continued, in soliloquy, 'we shall be near Melbourne by the end of this week. Then, for I suppose it would be dangerous for him to wait, I must huddle up a few dresses and be married at once. *Married at once!*' Here she sighed; the light died out of her eyes, and the freshness of the morn seemed to fade out of her face. How different was it from the meeting in Australia which she had promised herself in her more sanguine

imaginings! Even if he had been comparatively poor, her fortune would have sufficed for all needs until he was enabled to claim his paternal heritage. But now, how immeasurably worse than poverty was his condition!—disgrace, dishonour,—irrevocable, perhaps inexpiable,—possibly debarring him from ever claiming his rights! She saw herself after the vow had been sworn which bound her to a dishonoured man, a passenger in a foreign vessel, voyaging to a distant land, with perhaps dangers and privations in store of which she had no previous conception. How strange and unreal it all seemed!

But it was too late to despond—to falter. She had promised: she would perform. Shrinking with maidenly reluctance from the hasty, and in a measure clandestine, union to which she found herself committed, she felt compelled to call up all the reserves of resolution, of which she had so uncommon a portion, before she could still the instinctive

dislike to the next act in the drama of her destiny.

. . . . .

As these thoughts—sombre, hopeful, and desponding by turns—passed through her brain, the bright spring day wore on; the babbling brooklets, through which their horses plashed ever and anon, ran clear and sparkling. As Estelle Chaloner mused over her surroundings and gazed upwards through the tall white-stemmed eucalypts which, rank upon rank, hemmed in the rugged bridle-track, looked at the trooper, the gold-buyer, the rustic damsel who was to be by day and night her closely associated companion, she could hardly realise her own identity. 'How changed is my *monde*,' she thought, 'in the course of a few short months—my daily thoughts and feelings, my plans of the present, my prospects in the future! Am I indeed the same Estelle Chaloner who sat in the old hall at Wychwood for all the long sad autumn months, who saw the red leaves fall in those ancient woods,

waiting the while for the last sands of a sick man's life to run out? And now, where am I? and *what am I*? What I shall be in the future I almost tremble to think.'

Immersed in reverie, she had trusted the conduct of her horse almost entirely to his own discretion. A hackney exceptionally good in the slow paces, as are many Australian horses, the Wanderer had, for his own pleasure and satisfaction, gone forward at the top of his walking speed, which was sufficiently fast to keep her companion's horse at a jog-trot. From time to time, at an earlier stage, the rustic maiden had laughingly protested; then Wanderer was held back. However, in this particular instance the failure of consideration was unnoticed, until Estelle was aroused by a cry from her companion, so loud and vehement in tone that she knew at once that no ordinary occurrence had called it forth.

Reining up sharply, she turned in her saddle to behold a sight which blanched her

cheek and well-nigh froze the life-blood in her veins.

From out the tangled forest growth, emerging from behind a gigantic eucalypt, two men, masked and armed, had stepped into the roadway, abreast of the gold-buyer and the trooper. A third man, half hidden by the bushes, levelled his fire-arm a few paces in the rear. Both girls sat horror-stricken on their horses as the trooper's carbine and the fire-arms of the robbers appeared to make simultaneous reports. The gold-buyer fell heavily from his horse in the road; the trooper staggered and swayed in the saddle, dropping his reins, but recovered himself, though evidently hard hit and unable to control his horse. The wounded man rose to his knees, but at that moment one of the masked strangers rushed over and struck him over the head. Estelle's eyes darkened, and she felt as if all sensation was leaving her; but, recovering herself, she shook her reins, and the free horse dashed down the slope leading

to the creek of which they had been told, with the speed of a racer, accompanied by her terror-stricken companion, whose hackney followed suit with the instinct of his kind.

The creek was crossed almost immediately. Mile after mile fled away like a dream before either of the girls thought of drawing rein. At length, at the foot of a steep and rocky range, the horses commenced to slacken speed.

'My God!' said the girl, 'did you see that? They have murdered my poor uncle! Whatever shall we do? Do you think they will come after us? Is there any house that we can go to along this horrid road? I know we shall both be killed and planted so as never to be heard of again.'

'Let us think over our best course,' said Estelle, aroused to the necessity of self-possession in the hour of need, and in the presence of a weaker nature. 'I remember this range. Five miles on the other side is an inn, near a water-race. If we can get there we are safe; there seemed to be a good many people about

when we passed up. But I hear horses galloping after us. Good heavens!'

They stopped, and, listening, could plainly hear the sound of more than one horse coming fast along the rocky road behind them.

'We must turn into the wood,' said Estelle; 'fortunately it is thick enough to hide us until we see who are following up.'

They rode some distance into the forest, the low-growing pendent shrubs of which, the product of a damp climate and constant rainfall, were sufficiently dense to shield them from observation.

Nearer and nearer came the hoof-beats. The girls gazed anxiously through the close foliage. Then a chestnut horse came round a corner of the range, upon which sat a man whose arms were apparently helpless.

'Great Heaven!' said Estelle, 'it is Beresford the police trooper. He has been wounded in the arms. See! he cannot hold the reins, poor fellow!'

'That's his chestnut horse,' said the rural

young lady excitedly; 'I'd know his blaze and white stockings a mile off. But what's follerin' him up? I'm blessed if it ain't poor old Uncle Con's horse, and he's got his pack all right and reg'lar too. Those chaps is gone cronk and done their villainy for nothing. I'm dashed if I ever see the like!'

'We had better catch them up,' said Estelle; 'the Lawyers' Rest is hardly five miles distant. We might help that poor Beresford.'

Suddenly relieved from the deadly fear of the close presence of the wretches whose deed of blood they had witnessed, the girls put their horses to full speed and overtook one fugitive before he reached the hill-top. Bending down from her saddle, the Australian maid caught the pack-horse's bridle, bursting into tears and loud lamentation as she recognised her dead kinsman's effects attached to different sections of the pack-saddle.

'Poor old Uncle Con,' she said, 'there's his mackintosh, his water-bag, his billy-can—all

the old traps I know so well. Many a time I've joked him about them—so particular to have everything handy for camping, he was. He won't camp no more, poor old man! He said it would be his last trip, and so it was. I wonder if I shall live to see those villains hanged? That old wretch Coke's in it for one, I'll swear.'

Scarcely had they ridden another mile when they overtook the police trooper. Partly disabled and in pain, and guiding his horse with difficulty, the deathlike pallor of his face told of weakness from loss of blood; yet he braced himself gallantly for the work that lay before him.

'Let me hold your rein,' said Estelle, as she rode up to his horse's shoulder; 'are your arms badly hurt?'

'Riddled through and through,' said the young fellow, groaning. 'The brute must have loaded with slugs; my wrists feel the worst; and there's a hole in my shoulder as well. I may get some one to ride back with

me from the inn. I can't leave poor Con dead on the road.'

The sight of the unpretentious slab edifice with a bark verandah which was dignified with the title of Lawyers' Rest was more grateful to Estelle's strained vision than would have been the most palatial hotel in Europe, for around it stood a dozen men, while several horses, 'hung up' to the palings of the little garden, testified to an unusual gathering. The trooper's dull eye brightened at the sight, and he looked as if the spirit within him had power to overcome the weakness of the flesh. They rode up to the door, a strange cortège, in the eyes of the miners and squatters there assembled—a woman leading a horse, upon which swayed and bent forward a wounded man, while a girl followed with a pack-horse heavily laden and mud-splashed to the eyes.

As they reined up amid the excited crowd, the trooper lay forward in a deathlike swoon, and was only saved from falling by the strong

arms which lifted him from the saddle and bore him tenderly to a couch.

In broken and disjointed sentences Estelle described the deed of blood, while the gold-buyer's niece inveighed wildly against the murderers of her uncle. He was a well-known man, and a corresponding degree of indignation was aroused, while all necessary steps were taken for the relief of the fugitives.

The gold was removed, and, after being weighed in the presence of witnesses, deposited with the landlord, as also the other effects of the deceased. Wanderer and his comrades were stabled, a comfortable room prepared by the landlord's wife for the girls, while a dozen well-armed men were ready to start for the scene of murder within ten minutes of their arrival. With them rode Trooper Beresford, recovered from his faint. Revived with eau-de-vie de Cognac, he insisted on accompanying them.

But this was a bootless errand. Beresford

pointed out where the men first appeared from behind the buttress of the forest giant. The tracks were as a printed page to the experienced dwellers in the waste who stood beside him. But the gold-buyer lay dead in the centre of the road. From a gun-shot wound the blood had welled forth into a pool, while his skull had been cleft with more than one stroke of an axe.

'We'd better take him back to the shanty with us, boys,' said one of the older men, by common consent elected to act as leader. 'You young chaps as has got sharp eyes hunt about, and don't leave so much as a button behind if you come across one, next or anigh him. It's no use follerin' the tracks for more than a bit, just to see which way they've headed. Beresford here ain't fit, and if they're the men we suspect, one of 'em's near Mount Gibbo by this, and the rest many a mile off some other way.'

So the dead man was placed on a horse, and the party wended their way sadly back

to the little hostelry with their silent blood-stained companion.

On the morrow, at a formal meeting, it was decided that a strong body of volunteers, with a black tracker, should follow up the trail of the murderers. A reward sufficiently large to tempt an accomplice was offered for information leading to a conviction, an old comrade of the dead man subscribing more than half the amount. A messenger had been despatched to the nearest police station, and the Coroner shortly arrived to hold an inquest upon the body.

This melancholy business having been completed, and a verdict of 'wilful murder by persons unknown' having been brought in, Estelle felt sufficiently recovered to recommence her journey. Now that she had experienced one of the dread realities of goldfields life, much of her former confidence had departed. She felt an overwhelming impatience to regain the security of civilisation, and cheerfully accepted the offer of

the escort of the Coroner, who was also a police magistrate. He accompanied her as far as the next township on the way to Melbourne. There were also a couple of police troopers *en route* for the barracks at Jolimont, so that nothing better could be wished. At the township they fell in with a squatter and his daughter bound for Melbourne, with whom they joined forces till Toorak once more rose to view and the winding Yarra Yarra. And now this strange and terrible occurrence had passed like the horror of a dream, and Estelle Chaloner was again in Melbourne, safe under the sheltering wing of Mrs. Vernon. Awakening on the first morning in that well-ordered home, she felt as if evil-hap or danger could never menace her more. Shaken in nerve and outworn by the journey, words could faintly express the need she felt for rest. Yet a shuddering dread possessed her lest she might be destined for experiences not less terrifying and lawless in her future.

But no season of repose was as yet for her. She must risk whatever further trials fate had in store. Her word was given; the plighted vow must be kept. The life, the very soul of him to whom she was pledged to entrust all that womanhood holds most sacred, trembled in the balance. Was she, from girlish timidity, from mere nervous shrinking and feminine reluctance, to which she could not give a name, to draw back meanly from mere personal considerations? What were her wrongs and probable privations to *his*? The die was cast.

Early in the following week the half-expected, half-dreaded fateful letter arrived. 'He had taken *their* passage,'—'*our passage*,' she repeated to herself—'in the *John T. Whitman* for Callao, in the name of Mr. and Mrs. H. Johnson. He had arranged for the marriage at the little church at South Yarra, on the morning of the day the vessel was to sail. She would sail on that afternoon, and no humbug about it;

he had seen the first mate and made things right with him, so his information was good. Nothing remained, then, but for his heart's darling Estelle to hold herself in readiness to be at St. Mark's at the hour appointed, and all would yet be well. What he had suffered since they parted, no tongue could tell! . . . She might imagine his feelings when he became aware of the diabolical crime that had been committed. He was half-way to Melbourne when he heard of it. No doubt justice would overtake the guilty parties. *She* had escaped—that was everything. Poor Con Gray was right when he said it should be his *last trip.*'

And so the day was at hand—close, inevitable! This was on Tuesday. Saturday was the day fixed for the sailing of the *John T. Whitman*—for the joining of two hearts, two bodies, two souls—irrevocably, eternally—in this world and the world to come. For how can the human mind realise the essential dissociation during the probation

of this earthly life, or even amid the spiritualised conditions of another existence, of those *once* made one flesh — wedded, and welded together under the sanction of the most tremendous of human sacraments?

Like most prospective occurrences seen dimly and afar, Estelle Chaloner had not closely analysed her feelings when the day of doom should arrive. Now, she experienced a kind of minute analysis of her sensations, distinctly painful in its intensity. She read and re-read Lance's letter, and, among other things, marked with surprise an occasional lapse in grammar, or the use of a small letter when a capital was imperative. Even the handwriting, though more like Lance's letters from school than his latter-day epistles, seemed cramped and laboured. 'Poor fellow, poor fellow!' she said softly to herself, 'I suppose he hasn't written much lately. Australia is a bad country for correspondence, and yet——' here she smiled and blushed slightly as she recalled the pile of

home letters she had watched Mr. Stirling despatch one Sunday morning, and her playful reference to his dutiful habits. 'People differ in Australia, I suppose,' she continued, 'as in all other places. What ignorant folly it is to think otherwise!' and again she sighed—sighed deeply; then rose from her seat half impatiently. 'It is my fate,' she said; 'man or woman, who can escape their destiny?'

Of course, all Melbourne rang with the account of the Omeo Tragedy, as it was called. Every provincial paper, from one end of Australia to the other, had its moral deduction, its elaborate amplification. Murders and robberies were unhappily far from infrequent in those early days of the Gold Revolution—that social, political, and pecuniary upheaval which overturned so many preconceived opinions, and changed the destinies of states no less than individuals.

But for this special crime the horror was universal, the clamour for vengeance upon

the villains who had done to death a worthy and inoffensive citizen was exceptionally loud and persistent. A friend of the murdered man offered three hundred pounds for information leading to conviction; the Government as much more. It was confidently hoped that such 'honour among thieves' as existed would disintegrate before so powerful a solvent.

Meanwhile Estelle found herself, to her surprise and slight annoyance, placed involuntarily in the position of a heroine. Her portrait was in the illustrated papers; not, however, limned from any miniature, but hit off from a thumb-nail sketch made by an ingenious but deeply respectful young gentleman connected with the press, during the passage of a brief interview. It had leaked out in some way, probably through her travelling companion, that Estelle was about to be married to a man connected with mining pursuits (so he was described) at Omeo. This fact was dwelt upon and emphasised as adding to the natural interest

felt in the case. This version of the affair was more than distasteful to her; as, apart from her natural disinclination to be described and commented upon from every conceivable point of view, she dreaded lest the additional publicity forced upon her private affairs might prove fatal to Lance's freedom.

The bridal preparations, however, went on. Mrs. Vernon, having once expressed her sincere regret at the sacrifice, so complete and uncalled for, which Estelle was about to make, and having withstood, not wholly unmoved, the indignant remonstrance of the high-souled maiden, remained acquiescent under protest. Their vessel, an American clipper, was visited; the cabin allotted to Mr. and Mrs. Johnson criticised, but finally furnished and fitted up with many a cunning device for staving off the ills of a life on the ocean wave or lightening the *ennui* of a 'home on the rolling deep.'

Finally, the very day fixed for the ceremony

*did* arrive. Estelle appeared at breakfast pale but determined, and about eleven o'clock Mr. Vernon returned from Melbourne in a cab, prepared for paternal functions. Then this abnormally small South Yarra wedding-party drove down the Toorak Road, and, not far from the entrance of Caroline Street thereunto, alighted before the small but ornate church of St. Mark's.

'By the bye, Estelle,' said Mr. Vernon suddenly (he had long since arrived at the semi-paternal stage, which included the use of her Christian name), 'I met an old friend of yours in Melbourne, just down from the diggings.'

'An old friend?' she replied smilingly.

'Well, one of your oldest in this country, excepting ourselves. Guess who it was.'

'I am sure I cannot tell,' she said, 'unless it be John Polwarth. I shall always think of him as a real friend.'

'Not very far off. Was there no one else at Growlers'? Think again.'

'Mr. Stirling or Mr. Hastings then—good and true friends both. Which of them can it be?'

'Well, it was Charlie Stirling. His father was an old friend of mine, and a better fellow than Charlie doesn't live.'

'How strange! how wonderful!' said Estelle, almost musingly. 'To think that he should be down here before Lance goes away. Do you think he will come to see—to see—the ceremony?' And here a blush faintly overspread her countenance.

'He wasn't sure. Just off the coach, and covered with mud, but would rush off to his hotel and do his best. Then he told me a piece of news about himself.'

'What was that?'

'Why, he had got a year's leave of absence, and as he had made a lucky hit in the Coming Event,—a claim that's nearly as good as Number Six, he says,—he's going to treat himself to a run home.'

'Going to England! Mr. Stirling going

home! You don't say so? Who would have thought it?'

'Well, he is just the man to appreciate it thoroughly. It will improve him, as it does every Australian with the requisite amount of brains. Though I really don't see how Charlie Stirling *could* be much improved—except by a good wife,' he added thoughtfully.

'I am sure I hope he will find one,' Estelle replied; 'no one is more worthy of that or any other happiness. I wonder if he will come, and whether he will think Lance much altered?'

Mr. Vernon made no reply to this latter remark. Indeed he was strongly inclined to say, 'Confound Lance!'—or even to use a stronger expression. But he consoled himself with the conviction that it was impossible to advise women for their good—even the best of them. And thus reflecting he preceded the little party into the church.

They had purposely delayed so as to be as near the appointed hour—half-past eleven

o'clock—as possible ; and the half-hour chimes from the churches in the city were rhythmically audible as they entered and took their places. The gray-haired clergyman—a tall, venerable personage—advanced from the vestry and stood as expectant of the entrance of the bridegroom. As a side door opened, that personage entered from the right side of the chancel.

Mrs. Vernon gazed at the newcomer with unaffected interest. In certain respects he was a man whom no girl would have been ashamed to acknowledge—tall, erect, stalwart, his dark crisp hair and beard trimmed according to the prevailing fashion. He looked around with a quick and searching glance which apparently took in every individual in the church. Then he fixed his eyes steadily upon the group in the midst of which Estelle stood, and advanced towards his bride. He smiled as Estelle murmured his name, and hastily shook hands with Mr. and Mrs. Vernon, who seemed hardly prepared for the salutation.

There was nothing particular to find fault with in his morning suit, yet somehow Estelle could have wished one or two details altered.

The bride looked more than once towards the rear of the church, as if expectant. But the inexorable minutes fled, and walking forward, at a sign from the clergyman, she knelt before the communion rails. One gleam of triumph, which, had she caught, would have strangely disturbed her thoughts, flashed from her companion's eyes. He knelt beside her, and the time-honoured service commenced.

Every precaution had been taken to secure secrecy in the matter of the ceremony. When the little party walked unobtrusively in and the service began, there appeared to be no spectators but those already known and invited. In some mysterious way, however, the news spread. A wedding is rarely, if ever, conducted without a few attendants not included in the original programme. Some few strangers appeared as the clergyman commenced to read the opening sentences. They

were not, however, such as to attract attention. But just as the clergyman reached the words, 'Wilt thou take this woman to be thy wedded wife?' two men entered at one of the side doors and looked searchingly at the bridal pair. One of them gave vent to a sudden ejaculation, while the other, a tall man in police uniform, drenched and travel-stained, walked rapidly up to the altar. To the dismay of the congregation, he placed his hand on the bridegroom's shoulder. Not less menacing and abrupt were his words than this unusual act, of such unnatural seeming in a sacred edifice—

'Lawrence Trevenna, you are my prisoner. I charge you with the murder of a man known as Ballarat Harry, otherwise Lance Trevanion. Put up your hands,'—here the speaker's tones became harsh and resonant,—'or by ——! I'll shoot you where you stand.'

At the first touch of the stranger's hand, the bridegroom started as if to resist his captors, for by this time Charles Stirling

stood by Dayrell's side. For one moment he raised his hand as if to strike his antagonist, but as he faced the pistol level with his brow, and marked the sergeant's steady eye and grim, set countenance, his courage appeared to waver, then to fail utterly. He mutely acquiesced while the manacles were slipped over his unresisting hands. At this moment Estelle, who had been gazing at this strange and sudden apparition with wide eyes of wonder and alarm, uttered one piercing, heart-rending shriek and fell senseless into the arms of Mrs. Vernon.

Then Mr. Vernon, hitherto silent in wonder, as were the other witnesses of the scene, moved as if to address the intruder. It was not necessary to make verbal interrogation; for, advancing a few steps and bowing to the company, he thus addressed them—

'My excuse to you, reverend sir, and these ladies and gentlemen, must be the extremely urgent nature of my errand. My name is Francis Dayrell, a sergeant in the police force

of Victoria, at present quartered at Bairnsdale. I have ridden night and day to effect this arrest, and must ask permission to congratulate the lady's friends upon her escape from a fate too terrible to think of. This scoundrel, who has so successfully personated his victim, the late Launcelot Trevanion, is the husband of one Catharine Lawless, through whose information his villainy has been frustrated. Mr. Stirling' (here he motioned to that gentleman, who advanced to where the spectators stood amazed and awe-stricken) 'is in possession of the facts. I leave him to make fuller explanation.' Here Sergeant Dayrell bowed again, not without a certain ease which spoke of different experiences, and removed his prisoner.

. . . . .

It has been remarked that those clever people who dedicate themselves to a criminal career are prone to small oversights and inadvertent acts which often lead to their detection when success seems assured. Were

it not so, such are the qualities of coolness and energy displayed by the 'irregulars' of society, that its virtuous members would have but little chance of survival in *la lutte pour la vie*. After the event every one is wise; surprised, too, that the criminal should not have perceived to what his heedlessness plainly led. The evildoer himself is even genuinely astonished when, in his interval of enforced leisure, he gains the opportunity of reviewing his 'plan of campaign.' He perhaps owns to the gaol chaplain that he has been 'most imprudent.' But generally he is more concerned to establish a theory of unadulterated bad luck, and to lay the blame upon every one but himself.

Such misadventure occurred to Mr. Lawrence Trevenna—not less cautious than daring, as he had previously proved himself to be. He left home with surly abruptness, telling his ill-used wife that he was going to Monaro and might be a month or more away. She was not to expect him till she saw him,

and so on. A large draft of horses to take delivery of, etc.

To these considerate explanations the woman made answer that he need not trouble himself to hurry back on her account—indeed, if he never came back she would be all the better pleased. He might spare himself the trouble of telling more lies than usual, as whatever he did say about his business would make her believe something different.

'It would serve you right, you jade, if I never did come back,' he ground out between his teeth, mingling the words with a savage oath. 'I may take you at your word yet.'

'Do so,' she replied, 'and I'll go down on my knees and thank God for it. As He is my judge, if it wasn't for the child, you'd never have seen me here a day after you struck me first. Don't think I've left off cursing the day I ever set eyes on you—coward and thief—and worse that you are!'

He looked at her for one moment as she spoke, his eyes so full of murderous rage that a bystander would have thought to see him strike her to the earth. But putting strong constraint on himself, as, with a more than malevolent smile, he bade her go back to the hut and mind her baby,—'you're my wife now — for better, for worse, you know,' he sneered. 'Stay at home and mind the house while your husband's away.'

The last part of this admonition was lost upon the person to whom it was addressed, as with one fierce glance, expressive of the last extremity of hatred and contempt, the woman passed into the hut and slammed the heavy door, while her lord and master, whistling carelessly, pressed his horse's side and moved rapidly away.

In apparent pursuance of his proposed plan, Trevenna rode for a dozen miles down the Monaro road, then, wheeling suddenly to the eastward, struck across the bush until he picked up the track which led to Mount

Gibbo. There he met by appointment Mr. Caleb Coke, and was thus enabled to arrange certain illegal enterprises upon which they had resolved to embark.

For the first few days after his departure Kate felt little else but an all-pervading sense of relief, almost amounting to absolute pleasure. Lonely and depressing as was her isolated life, miles away from any neighbour; left for weeks at a time without a soul to speak to,—as she would have expressed it,—she still had her homely and simple avocations, amid which, like many a similarly situated bush matron, she found sufficient daily occupation.

She had her baby boy,—a fine sturdy year-old fellow,—her poultry, milch cows, and small patch of garden, to all of which she addressed herself in turn. By degrees a softened expression came over her face. The hard lines died out for a little space. It may have been that she even repented of the bitter words and angry mood which had of

late become habitual with her. And when in the sunset-time she caught her roan mare and rode around the paddock for the cows, carrying the laughing baby boy before her on the saddle, there was a wondrous transformation of the sullen-browed shrew of the morning.

The days passed on. The weather changed. The fresh, bright, cloudless days of the early Austral summer commenced to follow each other in unbroken peaceful beauty. The proud heart of the desolate woman was insensibly touched by the softening influences of the Great Mother. 'Bird and bee and blossom taught her'—a lesson of self-reproach and faintly shadowed amendment.

'Perhaps if I took him more easy like, he'd be a better man. Suppose he'd married Tessie, I wonder if he would have been different. She was always that quiet and patient with us all. She could get round Ned and bring him straight when no one else could. Anyhow I might have a try.'

Revolving good resolutions, Kate Trevenna, who, with all her faults, was energetic and most capable in household work, as are most of the bush-bred Australian girls of her class, set to work with a will and made her dwelling and everything within fifty feet of it as neat as a new pin. The forenoon having passed quickly in this occupation, she sat down to her mid-day meal,—a cup of tea, a slice of cold corned beef, with home-baked bread and butter of her own making,—when a traveller rode up. Him she knew well as a stock-rider on one of the far-out stations in the Monaro district.

'Come in and have a cup of tea, Billy. Let your horse go for a bit,' was the invitation by custom of the country. 'You've come a good way, by the look of him. I'm all alone, you see; Larry's gone a journey.'

'I know that, Mrs. Trevenna,' said the young fellow, taking off his saddle and putting a pair of hobbles on his horse before he

permitted him his liberty; 'I've just come from Omeo.'

'Omeo? that's not where he went. He's nigh Monaro by this time, and going farther still.'

'Well, he was in Omeo last Monday,' said the stock-rider, 'or some one dashed like him. They talked as if it was Ballarat Harry. I don't know him, but anyhow Larry's bay horse Bredbo was there, for I seen *him* right enough. I couldn't be mistook *about* that. He was foaled near our old place.'

'Trevenna at Omeo! Then he never went to Monaro at all!' cried the woman, with such a look, partly of surprise and partly of wild reproach, in her eyes that the young man recoiled for an instant. Something was wrong, he saw with instinctive quickness. He made a futile effort to undo the domestic damage he felt he had brought to pass.

'Perhaps he changed his mind,' he suggested doubtfully. 'He's such a rum cove, is

Larry. No one knows when he's comin' or goin' half the time.'

'I expect not,' answered the woman gloomily, as if talking to herself. 'Now look here, Billy Dykes,' she said suddenly, walking up to the man and looking into his face as if her flashing eyes could see his inmost thought, 'you and I knowed each other this years; you tell me all you heard about Larry, and keep nothing back, as you're a man.'

The young fellow seemed for the moment to have fallen completely under the spell of this fierce woman, whose burning eyes and passionate speech were for the moment suggestive of a disordered brain. He stared at her for a moment, and then replied—

'There ain't a lot to tell, Mrs. Trevenna; but I expect you have a right to hear it. He's no man to leave you like this, and there's more than me thinks it. He's gone to Melbourne, that's what's up. Barker, the storekeeper, told me.'

'Any one gone with him?

'No; not as I heard on.'

'You're keeping something back, Billy Dykes. Don't try and humbug me, or I'll——. In God's name, tell me everything. Was there a woman in it?'

'Well, she didn't go with him, they said, but, in a manner of speaking, it was all the same. He followed her, and a regular tip-top young lady, by all accounts.'

'Did you hear her name?'

'Miss Chalmers, or Challner; something like that. Not long from England.'

'*That English girl!* the *cousin*, of course,' she murmured, in a strange, low-toned, hesitating voice. 'So she's come out after all. You're mistook, Billy, old man; it was Lance Trevanion they seen—Mr. Trevanion, I mean—an Englishman, and very like Larry. They came out in the same ship. He was to marry this young lady, his cousin. And I know *he* was at Omeo.'

'That makes it all right then. You've no call to fret, Mrs. Trevenna, and I'm dashed

glad of it. Only what was old Bredbo doing there? *I saw him*, and couldn't be mistook. No fear. I know every hair in his tail.'

'It *is* queer,' said the woman, whose countenance had cleared wondrously, 'but, law, she may have got away from him on the road and turned up at Omeo. Anyhow, I'll ride over and have a look. You eat your dinner now, while I go down the paddock and catch my little mare.'

The bushman addressed himself to the cold beef and damper with a sigh of relief as he watched his hostess pick up a bridle and walk rapidly across the horse-paddock.

'She's a hot 'un, by the Lord Harry,' he said to himself, as he filled a pannikin of tea from the camp-kettle near the fire. 'I wouldn't be in Larry's shoes for a trifle if he's working on the cross with her. It's a bloomin' mixed-up fakement, anyhow. I heard as Ballarat Harry at Omeo was that like him you couldn't scarce tell 'em apart. And of course it must be him as went down with the girl. But

how does Bredbo come to be there? and old Caleb Coke handy too like an eagle-hawk shepherding a dead lamb. It looks "cronk" somehow.'

He had finished a satisfying meal, providing against future contingencies after the fashion of Captain Dugald Dalgetty (formerly of Marischal College), of happy memory, when his hostess rode up, sitting lightly yet erect on her bare-backed steed, with an instinctive poise, as in the side-saddle of the period, such as only the practice of a lifetime could impart.

## CHAPTER XXIV

Accustomed from earliest years to hasty departures, the nomadic Australian housewife was not long in making her simple preparation for a hundred mile journey.

The roan mare was carefully saddled and tied up to a tree. A leather valise was strapped on. Finally the child, dressed for the road, was brought out and placed upon the side-saddle, where with inbred sagacity he sat steadily and looked around with a pleased expression. Then Kate Trevenna, leading the mare to a log, lifted the child, mounted without assistance, and gathered up the loose bridle-rein.

'We're going different ways, Billy,' she said to her visitor. 'You're bound for Monaro,

and I'm going to be in Omeo to-morrow, if Wallaroo here stands up. I'll stop with Mrs. Rooney to-night at the Running Creek, and leave the boy there till I come back. She's awfully fond of children, and will do for him if it's a month. I'm going to find out the rights of this business before I come back. I don't know what to think of it, and so I tell you. If Larry's left me, it's the worst day's work he ever did in his life. I've got a horrid thought in my head. I can't hardly bear to think of it. If it hadn't been for you seeing old Bredbo there I'd have known it was Trevanion. I seen him nigh hand there one day last month. But *only one of 'em* at Omeo, and him off to Melbourne after that girl! There's something that wants taking out of winding. God send it ain't as black as I fear it is. Well, so 'long.'

Thus they parted. The bushman filled his pipe mechanically while she was talking, and rode meditatively adown the well-worn track which ran towards the east; while the woman,

giving her bridle-rein an impatient shake, started off at a fast amble, which her spirited hackney seemed only awaiting the signal to change into a stretching canter. She held her boy upon her knee, resting and partly supported against her right arm. Like bush children generally, he had a natural love for all sorts and conditions of horse-flesh, and as his baby fingers closed upon the rein, he seemed contented, even exhilarated by the motion, crowing and laughing with infantine delight. As for his mother, she appeared to take little heed of his childish ways, gazing straight before her with a far-off look in her eyes and an occasional shudder, as some darker imagining crossed her brooding brain. Occasionally she varied the fast amble at which her mare slipped along the forest track by a smart canter not far removed from a hand-gallop, but which, thanks to the easy gliding stride of the gallant little animal which carried her, did not render her living burden one whit less safe or easy to carry.

The sun was low when she sighted the paddock fence of the humble homestead where she proposed to pass the night.

The fence ran across a broad green flat or meadow, which had gradually widened from the upper portion of the gurgling mountain stream which traversed it. There were no gates. They were of infrequent occurrence in those days. But the slip-rails —three in number, and fairly substantial —showed where means of ingress had been provided.

Scarce half a mile from the primitive entrance, which necessitated her dismounting, was the hut, or homestead cottage, standing upon a sort of forest cape high above the rippling creek.

As she rode up to the door of the unpretending building, walled with slabs and roofed with bark, Kate gave a sigh of relief and stopped her horse. No one appeared for a minute or two. Then she raised her voice, in the high-pitched Australian call

—originally borrowed from the blacks, but since heard (unless modern novelists lie) in the streets of London — ay, even in the 'Eternal City' itself.

Before she had finished the second call, a young woman came running out from some building at the rear, and with many exclamations made haste to welcome her.

'The saints presarve us, and sure 'tis Mrs. Trevenna and her darlin' boy wid ye. 'Tis yourself is the moral of a good neighbor to be coming over to see me. And yees will stay the night — the Lord be good to us. It's no time to be travelling after dark. We'll have to take the saddle off ourselves. Sure we haven't half a man about the place, or as much as a dog. It's himself is away, and thim all afther him.'

'I'm come to stay the night,' Kate made answer, 'and I want to leave my boy with you for a day or two while I go to Omeo on business. Now you have the whole story, Mrs. Rooney. How does that suit you?'

'Tis what I do be praying for,' replied the handsome young Irishwoman, who lifted down the child without more ado and fondled him effusively. 'Here's my beauty-boy; sure I'll look afther him as if he was a young governor waiting to grow up. It's the darlin' of the world he is; the finest boy betwane here and Monaro. Come in and tell us your news, alanna. And the saints be good to us, whatever are ye doing wid the horse. Are yez going to hobble him, and the paddock the best grass between here and Gipp Land?'

'I don't doubt that, Mrs. Rooney, but I must be off while the stars are in the sky, and so I must make sure of Wallaroo. She can spell afterwards, but she must travel to-morrow, if she never does again. I'll tell you all about it as soon as I've put Harry to bed.'

'Come in; arrah, don't be standing talkin' there; come in, for the sake of all the blessed saints. And you looking pale and tired

like! Wait till I get you a cup of hot tay.'

'All right, Mrs. Rooney; I'll be glad to have one. I feel thirsty enough, though the evening's chilly. But while the kettle's boiling, I'll take the mare down to the creek for a drink, and then she won't be rambling about half the night looking for water. I want to be able to lay my hand on her at daylight, or before. There's a long day before us to-morrow, and perhaps Omeo won't be the end of it.'

'Saints above!' exclaimed Mrs. Rooney, who, an emigrant not long out from the Green Isle, and newly married to an 'Irish native,' was filled with daily wonder at the manners and customs of the bush,—'sure and ye does be taking terrible rides in Australia. And do ye be telling me ye'll be at Omeo by this time to-morrow? But hurry now, and I'll have a cup of tay and an egg and a buttered scone ready for ye whin ye come back.'

The saddle had been taken off and placed on a wooden stool in the verandah. Kate led her palfrey down to the clear, fast-flowing streamlet and watched her drink her fill. She then plucked a few handfuls of the strong tussac grass which lined the little flat and rubbed dry the marks on back and girth. This, with a slight general application of the improvised curry-comb, completed in her eyes all necessary grooming. Slowly, and with eyes on the ground, she retraced her steps, coming close up to the house before she unloosed the throat-strap of the bridle.

'Have you got a bell, Mrs. Rooney?' she said. 'I shall know where to look for her if it's dark.'

'To think of your wanting that now! 'Tis clivir of ye, so it is. Sure Mick left one here before he went away. Here it is now, and a good strong strap.'

The bell was fastened round the docile animal's neck, and then only was she suffered to depart, short-hobbled and quietly munching

the tall gray-green grass, and looking as if no thought of wandering could ever enter her head. None the less was it probable, as her mistress well knew, that if slip-rail or panel was down she would be at her old home by morning light.

The two women sat long over the fire, talking about things new and old, the baby boy sleeping peacefully the while. Nor did Kate Trevenna find rest when at length she sought her pillow. An hour before daylight she dressed and prepared for the road, caught and saddled her horse, which she fastened to the fence in front of the hut. Taking a cup of tea and a crust of buttered bread from her warm-hearted hostess, and kissing her child again and again, she rode away in the darkness ere the first streak of dawn-light illumined the eastern sky.

'Sure and she's the fine woman,' soliloquised Mrs. Rooney, as she listened to the sharp hoof-strokes which rang clearly on the rocky track; 'she has some great sorrow on

her entirely, or she'd never leave the darlin' babe this way. Anyhow, I'll be the mother he's lost, and maybe more, till she comes back. The saints be between us and harm,' with which pious utterance the kind, simple soul betook herself back to bed.

No grass grew under the roan mare's feet. Mile after mile she threw behind her; now striking out freely at half speed, now pulling up for a down-hill mile or so, over which she went at her fast, clever amble. Ere the sun was well up Kate was miles away from her resting-place of the night. A long day lay before her, for the journey would need every hour and every minute of the time. Long and tedious was the ride to Omeo. But the good mare had ere now known many a journey when the saddle had not been off her back between dawn and dark—far into the night, indeed. The Kate Lawless of old days was tireless as a forest doe. Some change in nerve and constitution had doubtless taken place since then. None the less was she still

a woman of exceptional energy and courage. And with bitter wrongs ceaselessly corroding in her heart, and the haunting fear of a dark and bloody deed uprearing itself before her in that lonely ride, she defied alike fatigue and womanly weakness with passionate disdain.

Mile after mile, over rough track and smooth, as the narrow winding but still plainly marked bridle-path led, with but rare and momentary halts, the brave roan mare, with her stretching, gliding pace, at times a hand-gallop, at times even faster still, swept on. An occasional drink in a mountain runlet—a half trot up or down the steeper hills—yet all unflinching, unswerving, the pair held onward their rapid way.

The day was far spent when the straggling tents and red-streaked mullock-heaps around the Tin Pot Reef came in view.

'Here it was,' she thought, 'where I saw poor Lance last. It isn't far to his claim—near the old dead urabba log. There it is! I'll go over and have a look.

She rode to the spot. The reef was not abandoned. The claim was in work. The raw-hide bucket was ascending and descending with its gold-besprinkled load, as so many a time at Ballarat and other places she had watched it before.

'Curse the gold,' she said aloud, 'and all that belongs to it! It was a bad day for the country when the first speck was found.'

'Halloo! mate,' she said to the miner above ground who was pensively turning out the broken quartz on the 'paddock' side of the shaft. 'How are you doing? Ground pretty good?'

'Might be better—might be worse, missus. Can't complain,' said the man civilly.

'Wasn't this Ballarat Harry's claim?' she inquired, with an assumption of carelessness, though her voice trembled and her cheek paled. 'You bought him out?'

'That's so. Sold it to Yorkey Dickson and me. Yorkey's below. We very nigh had to fight for it, after that. Some of the "Tips"

tried to bluff us out of it. Harry was a-comin' to see us through. Leastways he told a young man as we sent to him. But he never turned up. That was queer, wasn't it?'

'And you never seen him after?'

'Not a sign of him. Yorkey was for goin' into Omeo after him. Only we heard he was off for Melbourne. So we didn't bother, and the jumpers gave us best next day.'

'It *was* strange!' she said musingly. 'He was never the man to say he'd do a thing and then change his mind. No; good or bad, he'd stick to it, poor Lance! Well, I must be going. So 'long.'

Slowly the woman rode forward — rode along lost in thought, while the mare, keeping to the track instinctively, like most bush hackneys, shuffled along at her fast amble till they came to the Mountain Ash Flat, which lay between this reef and Omeo.

Here the mare made as if to follow an old cattle track, at right angles to the road, of which she possibly had previous knowledge.

'Won't do, old woman,' said Kate, aroused from her reverie by the slight change of direction; 'what road's this, I wonder? More tracks than one along it—one would think it led somewhere.' She stooped low from her horse, scanning with keen and practised vision the footmarks upon the pathway. 'God in heaven!' she suddenly exclaimed, 'how did that come there?'

In an instant she was off her horse and eagerly grasping at a glittering speck amid the grass. It was a chain—a gold watch-chain with a curious coin attached, which she knew well. She had often playfully noticed the female face upon it. Here it was. She held it to the light. A part was dimmed and mud-encrusted. It had been trodden into the earth, but since washed by the rain. And what was the stain, dark red across the gold? '*His* chain—Lance Trevanion's chain!' she murmured to herself. 'How did it come here? Of course he may have dropped it. I'll run these tracks a bit.

It looks as if—as if—but no! surely, it can't —*can't have been.* Oh, my God! they never could have *murdered him*!' As she muttered to herself, in disjointed and broken sentences, she led her horse along the narrow track, searching eagerly for the signs of passage or conflict — tokens that lie clearer than the printed page to the vision of the Children of the Waste. Yes! there *were* footmarks, deeply indented in places, as of men that bore a burden. Here was a fragment of a check shirt of the pattern the bush labourer mostly wears, there a scrap of paper; and at a turn in the thicket-bordered path a long-abandoned shaft came into view. Lower she bent, and lower still, scanned yet more earnestly the slight mark of impress, invisible save to eyesight keen as those of the wild tribes which had been wont to roam these lonely wastes.

'The grass is longer here,' she whispered to herself in low and ghastly tones. 'Something's been *dragged* this way; the edge of

the shaft looks broken down. Oh, my God! poor Lance, poor fellow, is this what you've come to after all?'

With stern set lips and eyes dry yet burning with deep unsparing hate, she secured her horse to a sapling. Then lying flat upon the earth, leaned over the edge of the dark unfathomed pit, and gazed into its depths, half dreading what her boding fears had shaped. She called too, at first brokenly, then loudly on him by name—'but none answered.' The tree limbs they had cast down had been lately dragged a few paces. The recent mark did not escape her watchful eye. As she looked heavenward in her despair she caught sight of a soaring eagle. On an adjacent tree sat a detachment of crows; she knew too well what their presence portended.

She drew herself upward, then walked slowly, almost totteringly, toward the patient mare. But before reaching her she dropped suddenly on her knees, and raising her clasped

hands cried aloud, 'As God Almighty hears me this day, I swear that I will take neither rest nor food until I've got the tracks of the murdering dogs that killed the man I loved. Oh, Lance, Lance! It was a bad day for you when we met first. But I'll have revenge on your murderers—revenge—blood for blood—cowards and thieves that they are. They had him crooked, I'll take my oath. And now, Lawrence Trevenna,' she said, rising from her knees, 'it's you or I for it—my life against yours to the bitter end,' she continued, in the same broken, muttering monologue which she had half unconsciously used since she had commenced to follow the trail of blood. Half mechanically she loosed the mare and remounted. Then, giving the reins a shake, the tireless animal dashed off at half speed—a pace from which her rider never slackened until she reined up, after the darkening eve had dimmed the outlines of forest and mountain, within sight of the lights of Omeo.

She had covered nearly seventy miles since daylight. Yet the fast gliding pace at which she rode up the main street indicated no trace of fatigue on the part of her hackney. For herself, every nerve seemed at fullest tension; she felt as if she could have ridden day and night for a week.

Attaching the bridle-rein to one of the iron staples with which the verandah of the chief hostelry was supplied, she went at once to the principal store, never very far from the hotel in country townships.

'Mr. Barker in?' she inquired of a tall slouching youth who was gravely engaged in selling matches to a Chinaman. Economical of speech, like most of his countrymen, he silently pointed to a stout man in a check shirt standing before a desk. To him Kate walked.

'You're Mr. Barker?' He nodded. 'Well, I'm Mrs. Trevenna. Has my husband, Lawrence Trevenna, been here lately?'

'I don't know as I remember,' said the

trader cautiously; 'what sort of looking man is he, missus?'

'Tall and dark; what most men and all fools of women call handsome. He *said* he was going to Monaro, but he's working a "cross," it seems to me. I shouldn't wonder if he's gone to Melbourne.'

'There's no one left here for Melbourne, or indeed for anywheres, lately, except Ballarat Harry,' answered Barker. 'We know him well enough, and your description fits him to a hair. There's been a young lady as come from England all the way to marry him. It was quite pretty to see 'em together.'

'So he's gone to Melbourne — Ballarat Harry, I mean?' she asked. 'Did he talk of being back soon?'

'Well, didn't say much one way or t'other. Rather short and grumpy he was lately, was Harry. I hardly knowed him, he seemed so different. He'd had a row with some chap too, and got his face pasted a bit. P'raps that made him cut up rough like.'

'Was he badly cut, then,' asked the woman, gazing earnestly in the trader's face, 'or just a bit of a rally like—half in joke, half in earnest?'

'Not it. A regular hard-fought battle. A fight to a finish, if ever there was one. First time I didn't notice it so much. Next time I saw he'd had a fearful pounding. But I expect he's all right now.'

'All right — very likely,' assented the woman absently. 'Can you tell me where the police barracks are?'

'There's the place, near that big fallen tree, but there's no one in it. Tracy went away home to White Rock yesterday. The other chap went away with the gold escort.'

'How far to White Rock?'

'A good thirty mile. There's a straight road; you can't miss it. It starts south as soon as you cross the bridge over the creek.'

'All right,' she answered, 'there's no turn off?'

'No; half-way you come to a shepherd's

hut. There's no one living there now. Keep it on your left, and the track gets plain again.'

'Thanks; good-night. I must see Tracy on business. I shall be there by bedtime, I expect.'

Then fared she forth into the night. No rest, no food for steed or rider till her errand should be done. The game, bright-eyed mountain mare, as much refreshed by the halt as a less high-caste steed would have been by a feed of corn, started away as if just mounted. Kate patted the smooth arching neck. 'Carry me well to-night, Wallaroo, and you'll never have another hard day's work as long as you live. Not if I own you, anyhow. And it'll have to be bad times when we're parted.'

. . . . .

Away through the darksome close-ranked forest groves—away through the rocky defiles where the mare's bare hoofs rang from time to time as on metal—away through sedgy morass and water-laden plain—away through the long gray tussac grass, which rustled wiry

and dry in the hoar-frost. The stars burned and scintillated in the dark blue cloudless sky. The low moon rose and stared—redly, weird, and witch-like — upon the solitary woman threading alone the dim desolate waste. All silently, yet surely, the slow hours sped. Still wound the forest path, serpent-like, amid untouched primeval giants. Still clattered the fleet mare's hoofs along the uneven trail. The great constellation of the southern heavens had changed the aspect of its cross when a chorus of barking dogs disclosed the outpost of law and order. A couple of huts, a slab stable, a small but securely fenced paddock, made up the establishment. She rode up to the gate of the little garden, and throwing down her reins as she slipped from the saddle, walked stiffly to the door of the cottage. She rapped sharply with the end of her riding-whip.

'Who's there?' a man called out.

'It's me—Kate Trevenna. Police work. Look alive.'

'All right, Mrs. Trevenna,' replied a cheery voice. 'Wait till I strike a light. Here we are. Walk in and sit down.'

'Oh, it's you, Tracy; I'm glad of that. Look here, is your horse in the stable and fit?'

'Fit as a fiddle; what's up?'

'Hell's up—murder—robbery—the devil's turned out, or something like it. You'll have to ride, I tell you. Where's Dayrell?'

'At Warrandorf, fifty miles off.'

'That's all right,' she answered; 'he'll do it yet, if he's sharp. Can you start in half an hour and take a letter to him?'

'Yes; in a quarter. Where's your letter?'

'You go and saddle your horse. You'll have to ride harder than ever you did since you were in the force, and I'll tell you what to write. Is your paddock all right?'

'Yes.'

'Then I'll turn my mare out while you're saddling and make the fire up a bit. I see there's a back log. I must have a cup of tea and a bite before I go to bed.'

In ten minutes the trooper was back, whistling to himself and apparently as cheerful as if a fifty mile night ride over a bad road was an adventure calculated to raise any man's spirits.

'Now, Mrs. Trevenna, where's your letter? You'd better turn in with the wife when I'm gone and you've made yourself a cup of tea. There's bread and meat in the safe.'

'How far is it to where Dayrell is? Fifty odd—nearly sixty miles. I can do it in seven hours—perhaps less. I'll be there soon after daylight, so as he can start at once.'

'That will do. Get your pen and a sheet of paper and write down what I tell you. Are you ready? Begin like this—

'This is from Mrs. Trevenna—Kate Lawless that was; every word is God's truth. Lawrence Trevenna and Coke have murdered Lance Trevanion and hid his body in a shaft near the Tin Pot Reef. I tracked them down, and to-day can show the place. Trevenna went to Omeo and passed himself off as Lance

to the young lady that came out from England to marry him. He's off to Melbourne, where they are to be married and start for England, he taking Lance's name, money, and wife. Ride like hell if you want to block the villain's game. Only left here a few days. That's all.'

'By Jove,' quoth the trooper, folding up the paper and putting it carefully in his pocket, 'that's something like a letter! I knew he was an infernal scoundrel, but I didn't think he was quite so bad as that. I do pity you, Mrs. Trevenna; but there's no time, is there? So I'll say good-bye to my old woman and clear. You chum in with her till to-morrow. I'll go back with you, and we'll see further about that shaft.'

Three minutes afterwards the trooper's horse-hoofs clattered along the stony track. Kate sat long over the fire, from time to time mechanically addressing herself to the simple meal which she had made ready. Then she arose, and slowly, with uncertain

steps, betook herself to the goodwife's inner chamber.

. . . . .

Thus, and by such means, was Lawrence Trevenna tracked—followed up—run to earth. From what trivial neglect and want of caution in 'blinding his trail' had the sleuthhounds of the law been loosed upon his flying steps; and from what apparently savoured of the merest chance had the avenger of blood been enabled to seize him in the hour of his triumph. Had but the ceremony been completed, had but the ship which sailed for Callao on the next day taken 'Mr. and Mrs. Johnson' among her passengers, what woe, limitless and irrevocable, would have been wrought! In that day no ocean telegraph was available to intercept the criminal, to ensure his arrest ere his foot touched the alien shore. Had but the trooper at White Rock been 'absent on duty,' had Dayrell been from home when he arrived at Warrandorf, the precious, indispensable time would have been lost—that day—that night

during which a desperate trooper, careless of life and limb, rode on relays of horses to Melbourne, and, haggard, sleepless, travel-worn, but cool and resolute as ever, arrived before the fatal vow was sworn.

Little remains to be told. The once brave, stalwart, gladsome presentment of him who was Lance Trevanion was recovered from the shaft and identified beyond dispute. For his murder, as well as for that of the gold-buyer Gray, Trevenna, Coke, and a confederate named Fogarty were tried. All difficulties of legal proof and identification were removed by the consistent conduct of Mr. Caleb Coke. True to his unvarying principles, he turned Queen's evidence. His life was spared. Trevenna and Fogarty were hanged. Unaffected by the curses of his comrades in crime and the execrations of the crowd, Coke retired to Mount Gibbo, and there lived out to extreme old age an unblest and solitary life. His secrets died with him, and were only told *sub sigillo confessionis.*

He retained possession of the hut under Mount Gibbo to the last. But the wandering bush tramp turned aside with a curse when he marked the sinister elder standing at his door, or sitting on the rude bank surrounded by his dogs. It was popularly asserted that he abstained from the use of ardent spirits, being fearful of betraying the crimes with the memory of which his soul was laden. But the stockriders averred that more than once, when passing the lonely hut after midnight, they had heard shouts and curses, mingled with screams and laughter even more dreadful. These were popularly believed to proceed from the Enemy of Mankind, or some one of his lieutenants engaged in spending the evening with his sworn liegeman, Caleb Coke.

After such brief interval as sufficed for her recovery from the shock her feelings had sustained, Estelle Chaloner naturally decided to return to England. The recurring horror with which she recalled her providential escape from a fate too dreadful to conceive needed the

anodyne of complete change of surroundings, of which a long voyage only could supply the requisite conditions. She therefore, to the unaffected grief of Mr. and Mrs. Vernon, caused her passage to be taken in the good ship *Candia*, in which the luxurious nature of her cabin fittings, duly provided by Mr. Vernon, caused much wonder and admiration among the other passengers. Mr. Charles Stirling, who had been so considerate as to delay his voyage, 'went home' by the same boat. It did not surprise her Australian friends to hear that he made such use of the exceptional opportunities enjoyed by a fellow-passenger, that Miss Chaloner consented to merge her future existence in that of Mr. Charles Stirling. This arrangement was completed at St. George's, Hanover Square, after the shortest interval allowed for the trousseau of a young lady of position. Mrs. Vernon's remark was something to the effect, that though she had striven to be true to her plighted faith, she really believed that

Estelle liked Charlie Stirling better all the time.

Number Six, Growlers', was worked out in due course, but not before Jack Polwarth found himself one of the richest men 'on Ballarat,' as he would have phrased it. This was what the world calls the height of good fortune. But there was an even rarer possession which John Polwarth and his good wife had been gifted with, even before the advent of the gold so plentifully showered upon them. This was such a proportion of sense and shrewdness as sudden wealth and its destructive flatteries had no power to assail.

In accordance with Mrs. Polwarth's aspiration, Tottie had been sent to one of the best ladies' schools in Melbourne. Here she had received careful instruction, and enjoyed the privilege of association with girls of the higher colonial families. Acknowledged to be 'sweetly pretty' in her maiden prime, as well as amiable, popular, and an undoubted

heiress, no difficulties were placed in the way of her invitation to vice-regal entertainments. Her father's mansion in St. Kilda was noted for its princely yet unostentatious hospitality. Small wonder then that Tottie — beautiful, cultured, a lady in mind and manner, such as her mother had fondly hoped to behold her, and withal credited with 'pots of money' —should marry a distinguished globe-trotter, a man of rank and ancient birth, be presented to her gracious Majesty on her arrival in England, and gain golden opinions in every sense of the word.

The after-life of Tessie Lawless was that of the woman who, partly from a natural tendency to self-sacrifice, partly from despair and hopeless sorrow, remained in the hospital to which she had devoted her life. Her course henceforth was the onward path of duty. During an epidemic of fever several of the nurses fell victims to their labours. A modest inscription in the Melbourne cemetery bears testimony to the anxious care and continued

watchfulness of Nurse Esther Lawless, the best loved and most deeply respected of all the hospital attendants.

Charles Stirling returned to Australia, but only to settle his affairs, and so that he might take up his abode in England 'for good.' His wife, naturally, could never be induced to return to Australia, even for a short sojourn. In spite of occasional twinges of regret which assail him when the continued absence of the northern sun tends to lower his spirits and suggest the 'golden summer eves' of his native land, Charlie Stirling finds the old country very fairly habitable. His wife's fortune, added to his own, provides an extremely comfortable, not to say luxurious existence, as well as an assured provision for the olive branches. The Honourable Mrs. Delamere (*née* Polwarth) and her husband—who will be a peer some day—are frequent and welcome guests. Mrs. Stirling takes great pride in introducing her beautiful Australian friend, whose fairy godmother,

while endowing her with fortune and fashion, added the rarer gifts of unselfish kindliness.

The estate and revenues of Wychwood went to the younger son—a devolution which afforded to all the country people unfeigned satisfaction, as removing the curse under which they devoutly believed the family to exist.

One mystery was unravelled, in the closer search made after his succession among the squire's papers. In a secret receptacle was discovered a collection of letters which proved incontestably that Lawrence Trevenna was his natural son, born two years before his marriage to the mother of Lance Trevanion. The girl's father was a disreputable horse-and-turf-tout and betting man in a small way in a distant county; the girl herself the worthy offspring of such a father—handsome, bold, unprincipled. The squire discovered that a deliberate plot had been laid for him. Hence his previous inexplicable hatred to all and every form of horse-racing and the gambling

therewith concomitant. Attempts at blackmail were referred to as having been resisted by legal advice, but finally compromised by the payment of a comparatively large sum—only a part of which had helped to provide passage-money and outfit for Lawrence Trevenna. Some fragmentary addenda to the faded writing and curiously worded letters told of deep and bitter regret—even of repentance. But the sin had been sinned. The guilt lightly incurred in the riot of youthful passion had grown dark and menacing of aspect with the slow gathering years. And 'the vengeance due of all our wrongs' had haltingly, but with sleuthhound deadliness, tracked down his happiness and shortened the wrongdoer's life. But for the fatal resemblance, the mysterious heritage of unbridled passion bequeathed to the Ishmaelite offspring, the heir of his ancient house had doubtless escaped injustice, imprisonment, and death. And now, 'Conrad, Lara, Ezzelia are gone.' A youthful scion—fair, blue-eyed, mirthful—

makes merry in the old halls of his race. But of the wandering heir — he who defiantly quitted home, and friends, and native land in search of gold ; who vowed to conquer fortune with the aid of the strong arm and tameless heart ; to return successful, rich, honoured of all men ; to claim his bride in his own ancient hall—of him the oaks in the Druids' Grove of Wychwood murmur to the midnight stars, 'Nevermore.'

THE END

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